



PAVN:
People's Army of Vietnam

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Douglas Pike



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War is the highest, most comprehensive test of a nation and its social system. War is a contest that not only tests the skill and strategy of two adversaries, but also their strength and will. Victory goes to the side which has the correct military strategy, which makes best use of the art of military science and which most successfully limits the war-making capacity of its adversary.

Sen. Gen. Van Tien Dung
Commander in Chief
People's Army of Vietnam

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Preface

The People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) stands today as the third largest military force in the world, bigger than the U.S. Army, behind only those two other communist military behemoths, the People's Liberation Army of China and the Armed Forces of the USSR.

Whatever one's feelings about the uses to which Hanoi has put its armed forces, it must be acknowledged that the Vietnamese communists created what is probably the most astounding military phenomenon of our lifetime. Coming out of nowhere, nearly always alone, and ever beset by powerful enemies and internal betrayal, PAVN not only survived but moved to stage center, where for years it consumed much of the world's energy. It frustrated three of the most powerful nations on earth, confused the world press, and confounded academia. When peace finally came, PAVN continued on in remarkable fashion. It doubled in size, then doubled again, becoming the largest per capita armed force on earth. It fought a two-front war, in Kampuchea and against China. By sheer weight of its presence it has transformed all of Vietnam into a praetorian society. All in all, an improbable record.

The essential question here is how did this all come about? How could a small, underdeveloped, poverty-ridden country create a military machine of such monstrous size? The essential answer—a theme running through this book—is that there was at work in Vietnam a peculiar alchemy: a messianic leadership of extraordinary insight acting as catalyst on a singular, centuries-old martial spirit. That combination of personality and culture made possible, inevitable even, the People's Army of Vietnam.

The history of PAVN is improbable from the start. It began

in the last days of World War II in a Vietnamese mountain cave near the China border when a thirty-two-year-old Hanoi history teacher named Vo Nguyen Giap and thirty-three others, mostly middle class, three of them women, all on the run from the French, banded themselves into what they called an Armed Propaganda Team. Its explained nature would have struck the bemused bystander, had such been on the scene, as exactly the sort of romantic madness to be expected in a colonial backwater from a clutch of reformers, Confucianists, and academics who had read a bit of Marx and Napoleonic lore. Yet these thirty-four triggered a chain of events that has revolutionized the conduct of warfare in our lifetime.

Under Giap's careful husbandry and the tutelage of an organizational genius known as Ho Chi Minh, the army of thirty-four began to grow, from a political force with guns into a semi-guerrilla army, then into a full twentieth-century armed force. World War II ended and peace came. The Viet Minh War began and ended and peace came. The Vietnam War began and ended and peace came. Throughout PAVN grew relentlessly, if anything, more rapidly in times of peace than during war. In 1945 it stood at several tens of thousands. By 1955 it numbered 200,000. By 1965 it was 400,000. By 1975 it was 650,000. Today it stands at more than 1,000,000, and even that figure is an understatement: it includes only the PAVN regular army. To it must be added a half dozen potent paramilitary elements of perhaps an additional 2,000,000. Thus Vietnam today, with a population of about 58,000,000 people—half of whom are males and half of those under the age of sixteen—has one of every three of its male adults in the military service or retired from it. And PAVN continues to grow.

The result is a modern-day Spartan social system that is deeply militaristic, not the stereotypical goose-stepping Junker variety, but, still, one of the most militaristically ingrained societies on earth. It is this phenomenon—how it came about and what it portends for the Vietnamese people and their neighbors—that this book seeks to explore.

As far as I am aware, no such general guide to Vietnam's communist armed forces has been written. For reasons not at all

clear neither scholars nor government analysts have ever given PAVN the attention it deserves. They produced a few monographs and a handful of periodical articles, but that is about all. The Defense Intelligence Agency maintains an enormously detailed data bank of what is called “order of battle” information, that is, designations, names, locations, and strengths of PAVN units. That information can throw light on PAVN capability but little on the intentions of PAVN generals. Through the entire Vietnam War, in and out of the U.S. government, such matters as the composition and mindset of the PAVN High Command, the operational code used in military decision making, an assessment of Hanoi’s strengths and vulnerabilities, even PAVN’s grand strategy, went virtually unexamined. The voluminous *Pentagon Papers*, in which one would expect close scrutiny of PAVN, contains not one full entry on it; material marginally relating to PAVN and its leadership totals only a dozen pages. The standard excuse for this omission, offered over years, is the complexity of the subject and the paucity of reliable information. That strikes me as mostly rationalization. Others working under equally difficult circumstances in attempting to study a closed society at a distance—Ruth Benedict with wartime Japan and Nathan Leites with the Stalin-era Soviet Politburo—found research methods and were able to make important contributions.

Because this is the first study of its kind, I have tried to keep the contents basic and to stick to such fundamentals as military heritage, organization, structure of the officer corps, strategic thinking, Communist Party influences on the military, and civilian-military relations. While sifting through hundreds of thousands of pages of documents I tried to employ a double criteria of selection: that which is important and that which is interesting.

This is not a history of PAVN’s wars as such, nor is it a study of its military strategy, although one important chapter does deal with strategy. Mostly it is a straightforward explanation of PAVN’s place and role in terms of Vietnamese national philosophy and governmental behavior—what war colleges call “concept of force application.” If we can come to understand that concept, we can see more clearly PAVN’s direct and indirect influences on policy formulation, and possibly we can more reliably anticipate Hanoi’s

future moves, something we failed to do in the past, and certainly it can be argued that America lost the war in Vietnam because of that failure.

Voltaire said he would turn over a library to write a single book. In researching this volume, I turned over the Indochina Archive, an immense holding of materials at the University of California at Berkeley, which probably contains more data on PAVN than any other open source in the noncommunist world. Even so, the result is an imperfect mosaic, a thousand fragments assembled, with many pieces missing.

About myself: I am not a person drawn to writing about armies in the night, nor do I love a parade. As with most of my fellow U.S. Foreign Service officers, I was, as we described ourselves privately, a professional civilian. It is puzzling that I have spent so much of my life in the midst of wars.

Before I was old enough to vote I found myself, as a U.S. Army volunteer, in World War II South Pacific campaigns, in now-forgotten battles at such green and tropical places as Milne Bay, Bougainville, Finschhafen, and Hollandia. Then to Luzon and Leyte in the Philippines and on to Japan. I was in the first contingent of troops to land at Sendai, arriving only a few weeks after the historic July 27 firebomb raid, and the scar tissue was still bright red on the hands and faces of Japanese we passed silently in the streets. A few weeks later I found myself standing at Ground Zero in barely cooled Hiroshima, trying to understand how that vast stretch of desolation could have been caused by something the size of a basketball.

In 1951 I was in Korea's war as a civilian writer with the United Nations. My work put me on the road almost constantly—up and down the peninsula, through all the provinces—and left an indelible memory of frozen pitiful towns that Operation Yo-Yo had left with scarcely one brick atop another.

And in 1960 I went to Saigon, a place from which, in a way, I have yet to take my leave. The Viet Cong was formed the month I arrived, and we grew up together. For fifteen years I tracked the enemy side from in and out of Vietnam, never away for more than a few months. I was a witness to most of the war's traumatic moments; and in between I circled the globe a dozen times with

brief stops at other conflicts—Lebanon, Central America, Berkeley.

This odyssey through organized warfare, social conflicts, and mass suffering led me into the existential heart of our age, dominated as it has been by fighting. Hence I can claim, unenviably, to be a man of this century, intimately experienced in the subject of warfare.

My long journey over the battlefields has left me with an implacable hatred for war, of a breadth and depth that permits little kinship with the antiwar activist. I see war in the way that most professional military men see it—as a bloody mixture of adrenaline, folly, and agony. Like most of them, I have concluded that the determinant for a war is not whether it is good or bad—all are bad in this sense—but whether it is required. The only valid test for war is its necessity.

I can be classified, I suppose, as a Vietnam area expert or a political scientist or a sociologist, although I like to think of myself as a generalist. In any event I am not a military analyst, and I have difficulty understanding the multidimensional, computer-based conduct of modern warfare. Certainly I am not a military strategist. That being the case, one might well ask why I wrote a book about the Vietnamese communist military machine. The answer, I think, is found in looking back at the Vietnam War, at its nature, its course, and its final outcome. I believe, as I did when first I went to Vietnam, that a person with a background in political science (especially Marxism-Leninism), social psychology, and the communication of ideas can better explain the unrolling phenomenon of the Vietnam War than one schooled in military science. The Vietnam War represented something new on the world scene, a different concept of war, one involving a radically new grand strategy. Knowledge of past wars, even great expertise in them, was of little use and could blind.

That perhaps is the moral to be drawn: we must disenthral ourselves about Vietnam. We must look anew and come to see clearly what happened to us there and what that means for our future. This book is meant to be an aid to that effort.

SECTION I

History and Heritage



CHAPTER 1

The Prussians of Asia

The alarums and excursions of war echo like an endless drumroll down the corridor of Vietnamese history. In vast and rhythmic cycles the Vietnamese experience for two thousand years has been invasion, siege, occupation, rebellion—interspersed with lesser moments of dissidence, covert militant opposition, and other forms of social sabotage. Mentally the Vietnamese always have lived in an armed camp.

They take pride, communist and noncommunist alike, in grandiloquent accounts of martial heritage, a cultural theme traceable to the earliest civilizations. In the Dong Son era, nearly 4,000 years ago, the communal temples in the Phu Tho region were presided over not by gods but by “generals.” From the mythic age comes the legend of the child hero of Giong village. The land is invaded, and the emperor sends forth messengers in search of men of valor. The mute Giong child volunteers at age three, eats heartily, and grows immediately into a giant. Astride an iron horse, iron mace in one hand and a golden sword in the other, he rides into battle, wordlessly vanquishes the invader, and disappears into the clouds. Even today this legend is celebrated annually in Giong village, outside Hanoi. Vietnamese seem particularly proud of figures from antiquity who were the cleverest in combat or who threw themselves away in some grand battlefield *beau geste*. Of all the legends, the favorite—reminiscent of Joan of Arc—probably is that of the Hai Ba Trung, the two Trung sisters, who, at the time of Christ, rode forth on battle elephants, leading their army against an infinitely superior Chinese force, and who, upon defeat, drowned themselves in a lake in Hanoi, which today, despite official disapproval, is hallowed by a thriving mystic cult.

Asia’s first military academy opened in Hanoi in the thir-

teenth century and shortly thereafter produced the region's first military handbook, which contained an innovative strategy that enabled the Vietnamese army to defeat the previously unstoppable hordes of Kublai Khan. Even earlier, in the tenth century, Vietnam supposedly had a million-man army at a time when its population probably was little more than two million.

Vietnam's national tradition, says Hanoi historian Le Dinh Sy, is that every Vietnamese is a soldier, the model citizen being the farmer in the field who is ever-ready to drop his hoe and march off to battle:

The book *Annam Chi Luoc* records the fact that "all the people fought the enemy" during the Tran Dynasty. The historian Phan Huy Chu wrote in his work, "Everyone was a soldier during the Tran Dynasty," which is why they were able to defeat the savage enemy. . . . This is the general experience throughout our people's entire history. . . .¹

The Vietnamese perceive themselves as *defensively* martial. Their reputation among their neighbors, particularly those on the Indochinese peninsula, is as *aggressively* martial. The Vietnamese's Long March to the South, akin to the westward movement in the United States, was a brutal expansion of empire over the bodies of the Cham, the Khmer, and various tribal peoples of the Highlands. The Vietnamese fought the Siamese, the Burmese, and, of course, eternally, the Chinese.

In more recent times, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the scene was filled with Vietnamese in nearly continuous episodic rebellion that predated most of the modern revolutionaries.² Certainly, if the standard Hanoi histories are to be believed, such as Mai Thi Tu's *A Century of Anti-Colonial Struggle (1895-1954)*, the French era was one long unbroken battle conducted by virtually every Vietnamese, urban and rural, North, Center, and South alike.³ Leadership was by talented amateurs, for the most part Confucian-trained gentry from the villages who, for one reason or another, became insurgent leaders. One such was Truong Cong Dinh, a council-of-elders chief from the My Tho region of the Mekong Delta. When the French colonialists arrived and invested what later became Saigon, and the Imperial Army garrison fled, Dinh raised a force of 5,000 and rode to the

rescue. His frontal assault was shattered, and he returned to the Go Cong area to begin guerrilla war, funded secretly by the court in Hue. Although an utter novice, he was quite successful. Wrote an early French military historian about Dinh's practice of war:

There is no more painful, dull and tiring sight than that of the French moving over land and water. One of the adversaries is continually in sight, the other never. The enemy persistently slips away. It seems as though we were hitting only a vacuum. . . . The Annamese, armed with weapons ineffective against our carbines, rushed at our men with a blind energy that testified to a rare courage and extraordinary abnegation.⁴

There appears to have been a rather large number of these village elders turned guerrilla leaders. A French officer wrote of them in action:

The insurgents are commanded by true chiefs. . . . One cannot understand how these men, gathered in a narrow area, crushed by the fire of four artillery pieces firing from a distance of 300 meters, could hold out so long. If the enemy does not have the fanaticism of a Kabyle or a Sudan guerrilla, he has keener intelligence and a remarkable power of assimilation in understanding our strategy and tactics. He shows great skill in choosing and fortifying positions, indifference and impassivity when facing death. . . .⁵

A sense of this martial heritage was captured at a conference in 1982 in Hanoi that was attended by most of the leading intellectuals in Vietnam. It was titled "Cultural and Spiritual Values of Vietnam" and was held at the Marx-Lenin Institute. Presumably the regime wanted an indication that Marxist values are currently dominant, and while some token gestures were made in that direction, most values emerged as far more traditional. The stress was on Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and, to no small extent, xenophobia, which certainly is a heritage if not a value. Further, much of the expression was in terms of the necessity and the glorious quality of eternal militancy as a value:

Over the past several decades philosophers and sociologists of the world have discussed the values of man at great length. . . . We have established a goal, a path to follow, a life style. What are the most beautiful values in life? We answer that question

by choosing and fighting for the value of determined action. The fight we have waged over the past half century has been to battle the French, drive off the Japanese, drive off the French and the Americans, and defeat the Beijing expansionists. This test of strength has demonstrated the most beautiful value of man. During the past half century we crushed countless malicious schemes and defeated countless barbarous weapons and innumerable insane actions of the enemy. . . .⁶

A remarkable work by five Hanoi historians, titled *Our Military Tradition*, makes this central point:

Through the millennia of their history the Vietnamese people have struggled incessantly against foreign invaders . . . in great battles that took place one century after another [which, as described here] give the reader an idea of what traditional military art in Vietnam was like.⁷

It matters not whether the account of these battles is factually correct—certainly it is hyperbole—for what is truly significant is the portrayal of a Vietnamese martial spirit that reaches beyond ordinary jingoistic militarism into the realm of rationalized behavior so ingrained in Vietnamese consciousness as to be inseparable from other social traditions.

Vietnamese philosophies and religions have accommodated this martial spirit, as they have in most other societies. Traditionally there is strong prejudice in Asia against warfare and the fighting man, partly because of Buddhist influence (strongly hostile to taking life) and partly because of Confucianism and the ethic that deprecates warfare and puts the soldier last on the list of four social worthies and thus at the bottom of the social ladder. Experience also has tempered attitudes among the Vietnamese in recognition of the fact that the general record of Asian men at arms is chiefly one of attacking and plundering whoever was weak and at hand. In fact, the calligraphic root word in Vietnamese for *soldier* is the same as for *bandit*, just as *general* and *warlord* stem from the same root. These moderating influences, however, have been largely lost in the continual drumbeat of war.

Hanoi historians today treat this spirit mostly as the manifestation of exemplary behavior, as opposition to internal tyranny, or as response to cruel aggression from the outside. It is

the spirit of *chinh nghĩa*, literally “just cause,” connoting a highly moral act, rooted in rationality, compassion, and responsibility. It was this spirit that motivated the Vietnamese in the struggle against Mongol barbarism and against *Han-hwa* (Sino-ization) efforts by the Sons of Han, as even today it motivates Vietnamese against perceived Chinese hegemonism. *Chinh nghĩa* was seen as the essence of the resistance against French colonialism and later against American neocolonialism. These histories tend to gloss over demonstrations of the martial spirit that resemble more ordinary national passions, such as ambition, aggression, or revenge, that mark wars and campaigns from the fourteenth century onward against the Burmese, the Siamese (Thai), and the Khmer; against the nearly exterminated Cham and the Montagnards in the Highlands; and, once again today, against the Khmer in Kampuchea. The heritage that has come down is a special kind of martial spirit, one both ferocious and virtuous. With the present Hanoi leadership it is encased in certitude and heavily lacquered with self-righteousness. A typical expression of it is found in Le Duan’s words to some PAVN soldiers: “We fight and win not because we are endowed with steel skin or copper bones but . . . because we are Vietnamese who are moral, loyal, patient, strong, indomitable, filled with compassion.”⁸

Such is the stuff of Vietnam’s account of the Vietnamese at war: always they are victims of unprovoked attack by the mindlessly determined enemy, in most instances the Chinese, who persists despite ghastly casualties and stunning defeats that stretch across decades. Always the Vietnamese are inferior in numbers and material, yet they can “annihilate the enemy in tactical annihilation, then strategic annihilation, wiping out the enemy”; and it is all made possible by their superior intelligence, flexibility, ingenuity, and innovation. In the end victory comes to Vietnam because of the unique twofold character of its fighting prowess: first, it can mobilize all the people and turn every inhabitant into a soldier; second, it cleverly applies “knowing how to fight the long by the short, the strong by the weak, the great numbers by the small numbers, the large by the small”—in short, with organization and strategy (not, it should be noted, through spirit or ideology, for those are effects not causes).

Although this Vietnamese self-perception is universally ac-

cepted and seldom questioned, or even examined critically, in strict factual terms the perception overstates the case. Over the centuries the Vietnamese have endured warfare no more incessantly than have most of their Asian neighbors, since all the peoples of the region in those distant early years before the coming of the West were given to bellicosity and expansionism and usually were ruled by greedy kings and warlords ever alert to the opportunity of gain through attacking a weakened enemy. Thus warfare was distributed more or less equally. Probably life in Vietnam also was marked by long periods of peace, tranquillity, and the absence of a sense of imminent attack.

That is not what the Vietnamese tell themselves today, not what is taught in their schools, and not what they believe. The theme of their history—like Prussia's in Europe—is that Vietnam is the most fought-over ground. Vietnamese battled China with amazing determination for centuries, battled the French, the Americans, now the Khmer, and again the Chinese. In between they have battled the Thai, the Burmans, the Lao, the Cham, the Montagnard. And they have battled each other in regional and dynastic combat and other forms of internecine strife. Thus the Vietnamese heritage is clear.

Early Doctrine

Conceptual thinking by early Vietnamese communist leaders on the subject of armies and the use of armed force developed slowly. The Party was created formally as a single entity in 1930⁹ and during its first decade had nothing that could be called a military force. At the founding conference in 1930 there was some formal thinking on the matter:

The Party line [policy] for the Vietnamese Revolution was laid down in the [1930] *Political Thesis*. The summary [initial draft] was written by Ho Chi Minh and the [final draft] *Political Thesis* by the first Party Secretary General Tran Phu. A bourgeois-democratic revolution led by the working class was to be carried out. A people's national-democratic revolution would overthrow French colonialism, win back national independence, abolish the feudal regime, bring land to the tillers, and advance directly to socialism without passing through the stage of capitalism.

The Party decided to build a close worker-peasant alliance as in uprisings to wrest back power for the people. Therefore from the start the Party decided that together with political organization it would set up Worker-Peasant Guard units as the first step in founding a worker-peasant army.¹⁰

Early Party histories, those written in the 1950s and 1960s, soft-pedal this army building, but those published later have been more forthright:

The February 3, 1930, Founding Conference of the Indochinese Communist Party's Outline Program provided, among other things, for the organization of a worker-peasant army. Later on, various meetings of the Party Central Committee put this policy into practice with resolutions setting up self-defense units and people's armed organizations. From its very beginning, the Indochinese Communist Party realized that without armed struggle closely combined with mass political actions, a colonial people could not overthrow imperialist domination. . . . The first worker-peasant self-defense unit came into being during the upsurge of the Vietnamese people's political struggle in 1930–31 which culminated with the creation of the Nghe Tinh Soviets.¹¹

Early Party thinking on armed struggle, warfare, and the general subject of use of violence was highly conservative. Very early in the Party's history, in the late 1920s, radical influence was strong. Many in the organization were moved by the example of the Shanghai commune early in the decade, even though it had failed, and by the more romantic Paris commune a century and a half earlier. The Party also was pressured by the rival non-communist Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD) nationalists who were assassinating French officials, planning armed uprisings, and generally behaving in the manner the radical communists believed the communists should. Nguyen Phong Sac, an early Party Central Committee member from Nghe An province, organized a network of industrial worker cells (chiefly from the railroad system) and pressed for a "campaign of direct action." For a time his view prevailed and his cells engaged in militancy—beatings, murders, assassinations, and other forms of terrorism, chiefly against other Vietnamese. The VNQDD also was active at that time in widespread anti-French activity in certain provinces of

Central Vietnam. The result was that disarray then semianarchy developed in those provinces, discrediting the traditional village authority and weakening French control. That led, in 1930–31, to replacement of village rule with communes or soviets—sixteen in all in the Nghe An–Ha Tinh region—intended to be the revolutionary base from which the fire of revolt would spread to all of Indochina. However, French reaction was swift and effective. The soviet movement was destroyed by decapitation—removing its leaders in one way or another—and by introducing new incentives for the native loyalists managing the traditional village administration. As a result of this exercise in futility, Ho Chi Minh and other Communist Party leaders came to several conclusions: (1) that the greatest folly possible was premature action; (2) that it was an error to use extreme violence and terror against the surrogate Vietnamese serving the French rather than against the French themselves; and (3) that a constant, continually changing need existed to clearly define the enemy. The net effect was to leave a lingering prejudice against direct action.

A Party directive dated 20 January 1931 established what were termed the Worker-Peasant Guards, later Worker-Peasant Self-Defense Units, still later simply Self-Defense Units; Hanoi historians today prefer the term Red Guards. Their chief role was as an internal apparatus¹² to protect meetings and act as bodyguards for leaders. These units saw brief action during what was called the Nghe-Tinh¹³ period (1930–31), which witnessed abortive efforts to oust the French and the temporary emergence of the Nghe-Tinh Soviets, a premature experiment in communism. Most of the tumult of the Nghe-Tinh was the work of the Party's militant archenemy, the VNQDD. Today Hanoi historians cite examples of Red Guard activity: a raid on a police box in Ba Xa village (now Hau Loc) in Na Tinh province in June 1930 and the dynamiting of a bridge on Highway 4 on 1 September 1930.¹⁴

The Party's central armed force concept of the 1930s was *tu ve*, the self-defense units. These initially were called simply Self-Defense Force units; later came a variant, the Armed Self-Defense Force units, which were more heavily armed, more offensive minded, and something of a cross between a static guard and a guerrilla band. Even then, the force was in the context of a broader concept, that of *dau tranh*.¹⁵

The early Party leaders made it clear that they believed the revolutionary direction for Vietnam lay along the path of *dau tranh*, of which there were two types: *armed dau tranh* and *political dau tranh*. They never embraced the idea of pacifistic opposition to the French in the manner of Mahatma Gandhi, but they did hold that the “character of the epoch” of the 1930s was such that armed *dau tranh* was premature.

Nevertheless, the concept of force and violence was always implicit. As Sen. Gen. Van Tien Dung would write much later:

The Party’s revolutionary program from the start affirmed the revolutionary line of use of force to gain power and the inevitable requirement for a revolutionary Armed Force. In the February 1930 Party platform, President Ho Chi Minh noted the organization of a worker-peasant army. The Party’s October 1930 Political Platform clearly indicated the task of arming workers and peasants, establishing a worker-peasant army, and organizing a worker-peasant self-defense force.¹⁶

At the Party’s First Congress in Macao in March 1935, official thinking on military matters crystallized with the preparation of a directive outlining the theoretical concept and ultimate character of the Party’s future armed force, when it was eventually created. It would be called, for working purposes, a Military Self-Defense Group and would have four tasks or duties: to protect the revolutionary organs and combatants, to support individual *dau tranh* actions, to train and educate Party members in proletarian military strategy and tactics, and generally to support the cause against the exploiters. The Macao resolution also set forth basic principles of the armed force as it was to evolve during the next seven decades; it must always be kept under close Party leadership, it must eventually develop capability for armed *dau tranh*, it should maintain close association with the population and “observe broad democracy,” it must maintain strict discipline, and it should develop in such a way as to become the nucleus of the future revolutionary army.¹⁷

The organization of this military force would employ what was called the “three-by-three” system; that is, the lowest unit was the squad (of five to nine persons), three of which formed a platoon, three platoons a company, three companies eventually would

compose a battalion, and so on up through regiment, division, and corps. (See Section II.)

In analyzing early Vietnamese communist thought on the subject of military affairs, it is difficult to separate Marxist and Leninist influences from traditional Vietnamese ideas. Indeed, it is difficult to determine whether in the 1930s true communist thinking was significantly involved. One concept that does seem traceable to Marxism lies in the temporal dimension: whether or not time is on one's side, that is, raising the philosophical question of historical determinism, being able to understand and chart the course of events. Is history a snowball rolling down the mountain? Such an idea is alien to Vietnamese thought, in which many things are inherently unknowable. But Ho and the other early Party leaders regarded the temporal dimension as something they could master. They believed, or certainly asserted often enough, that time was on their side, and they demonstrated a strong certitude in being able to predict the course of events. This faith in their ability to read and harness history was firm from the first, remained so throughout the successive decades, and was never seriously shaken, as far as we know, by even the worst reverses and defeats.

This temporal quality, however, also has about it an authentic Vietnamese heritage in part. It has to do with the timing of events: when on the continuum of time to act and when to delay. The concept is called *thoi co*, roughly translated as "opportune moment" but connoting a profound, even mystical meaning about the appropriate moment for action—akin to what Shakespeare called the "tide in the affairs of men which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries." How to recognize that moment when it comes and how to be sure—these questions were the source of endless discussion among the Party faithful through the years. What was the *thoi co* for switching from political *dau tranh* to armed *dau tranh*? For the guerrillas to come down from the hills? For PAVN to be created? That apprehension, almost metaphysical at root, nags at the Party leadership in Hanoi today. Some—Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap included—argued in 1978 that it was not *thoi co* to invade Kampuchea. It was his mistake, perhaps, to be correct.¹⁸

A second Marxist influence involved extensive use of special rhetoric, if not tortured semantics, to surround everything the Party said or published during the 1930s about armed force. There was, for instance, the delicate treatment afforded the idea of *tu ve* (self-defense), which was the code word used both within and outside the Party for Party armed force in any form. Of course *self-defense* connotes the benign, the legitimate, having and defending one's own, while *army* smacks of attack and aggression. Heritage reinforced this usage. *Self-defense* was palatable for the villager and carried a minimum of threat to the French colonialist. Giap suggested early that when the Party's militant resources are few and any military force it creates of necessity is weak (as in the 1930s), it is better to label it "a Worker-Peasant Self-Defense Force . . . not a Guerrilla force and not a Red Army."¹⁹ The pabulum effect worked then and even later in the South during the Vietnam War with some Americans who viewed the Viet Cong "self-defense forces" as merely fending off the Ngo Dinh Diem government's fascism.

Later, when Giap created a military force that, in terms of internal indoctrination and external advertisement, was aggressive and offensive minded, he was saddled with the previous terminology. He offered the explanation that there was a difference between "combat self-defense forces" and "ordinary self-defense forces."²⁰ This usage of "self-defense" persists and still is employed to describe PAVN's militia.

Another semantic characteristic was the studious avoidance of straightforward statements that the Party was seeking to build an armed force. Giap and Party historians alike carefully portrayed the idea of army building as "conditions ripe for armed violence" and for "the worker-peasant masses under the Party's command to seize power,"²¹ as if this somehow were to occur spontaneously. Giap's favorite expression to describe the building of PAVN, from which he drew the title of one of his most famous books, was that the Party would "arm the revolutionary masses and give them military training."²² He indicated that even after victory the Bolshevik Revolution ideal would be followed, and there would be no standing army created, only an "armed people."

Actually there is much to be said for the logic of General

Giap's and the Party's choice of words and definitions, and there is no intent here to put down their usage as mere double-talk. In the minds of the leaders of the 1930s the Party was not preparing to build an army but preparing to create a new militant force so unique that they would have held the word *army* technically incorrect and certainly inappropriate.

From the writings of Party officials during the time and from what has been written officially since, it is possible to extract a conceptual statement of official strategic thinking in the earliest days. Some of it drew on Vietnamese heritage, some on materials imported from Moscow, and some was mere common sense. Briefly the key concepts appear to be these:

1. There must be total mobilization of the people—organizing millions to rush into battle—a task only the Party is capable of handling.
2. The struggle must be geared to the broader world scene and to history, that is, organization counts for all; it must harness the Party's strength to the strength of the era and the strength of international developments. Implicit in this is the sense that there is need for outside support, psychic as well as material. However, in contradiction, the principle of self-reliance, of being dependent on no one since no one can be trusted, was stressed early.
3. The force of nationalism must be linked to the appeal of socialism-communism.
4. An aggressive mentality is required for all participants, and it must be manifested in steady offensive actions, even if insignificant. The great enemy is passivity.
5. The struggle, as a playwright would say, must build. Strategy should seek to deliver small defeats to the enemy, one after another, so that he is slowly reduced until the final *coup de grâce* can be delivered. Struggle must come in stages.
6. The most important requirement is the proper blending and timing of armed struggle and political struggle, which seem in the final resolve to be matters almost of intuitive judgment by the Party. Time becomes a mystic dimension.

An additional heritage should be noted here, although it is considered in detail in a subsequent chapter. It is the famed "red vs. expert" argument inherited from the Chinese, which in oversimplified terms, asks the question: In the proper conduct of

war, which is defined as the comprehensive test of all adversarial strengths—material, immaterial, spiritual, psychic, and so on—which counts for the most: men or weapons? Admittedly, a false dichotomy, but the issue as a great debate has had, and still has, enormous effect on PAVN. The matter cuts across the entire PAVN scene. It has to do with strategic considerations and, in fact, is central to any grand strategy since it involves questions about how a war is to be fought, what sort of an armed force is to be created, and what tactics to use. It also has much to do with leadership, with the kinds of persons who make the best officers, and thus affects careers from generals to privates. And in subtle but important ways it has to do with Party-military relations because by raising what in effect is the ideological factor, the question of centrality in decision making between Party and military also is raised. On one level it can be argued that the red vs. expert issue within PAVN has now been settled in favor of the expert. Yet a doubt lingers on, as an influence, a dimension of mystique. It seems appropriate therefore to discuss the issue in the section on PAVN ethos.

Armed Dau Tranh

World War II began in September 1939 and plunged Indochina, even though it was not strategically a part of that war, into an immediate crisis of traumatic change. For Ho Chi Minh and the Party it also presented a momentous opportunity. In the South, particularly, many believed that the *thời cơ*, or proper moment, had come for all-out action, for the Party to raise a full-scale army and begin warfare.

The Sixth Party Plenum met in Gia Dinh province outside of Saigon in early November 1939, and was attended by a number of impatient activists, including its chairman, Nguyen Van Cu, and Le Duan, Phan Dang Luu, and Vo Van Tan. Cu's Political Report called for the immediate formation of a united front and a united front army to wrest Indochina from the weakened French and, if necessary, fend off the threatening Japanese army: "There is no other road but to overthrow the French imperialists and resistance against all aggressors—white or yellow [that is, Japanese]—for national liberation. . . . All the questions of the revolution including the agrarian question [land nationalization] must

be settled with this end in view . . . [so as to] create conditions for violent action and national liberation revolution.”²³

It was part expectation and part hope born of enthusiasm, but the report reflected sentiments in the South where the Plenum decision was quickly translated into action. Within months, self-defense units were established in seventeen southern provinces. This burst of activity was greeted with misgivings by Party leaders in the North and by Ho Chi Minh, still abroad, whose judgment was that it represented rash adventurism. They seem to have been proved correct, for the Party in the South did pay a high price with the subsequent bloody suppression by the French of the November 1940 peasant uprisings, urban riots, and other public disorders that came to be called the Nam Bo Uprising. Nevertheless, Party historians now record that period—late 1940 and early 1941—as the historic moment when the cause passed from political *dau tranh* to armed *dau tranh*.

The first military action in Indochina by a forerunner of PAVN that could be called more than a misbegotten reaction to local grievance came with the myth-encrusted battle of Lang Son, followed by the Bac Son Uprising (27 August 1940). Today Hanoi historians take full credit for Bac Son in the name of the Party. Their version is that the Bac Ky (northern) Central Committee of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) had dispatched Tran Dang Ninh to the region early in 1940, where he and local Party officials recruited and formed the Bac Son Guerrilla Unit, which was in the center of the uprising. The unit was, the history continues, decimated by the French in the course of the uprising. Whatever the reality of these two incidents, both have become seminal events in the history of PAVN.

France had collapsed in the summer of 1940, and the Japanese had availed themselves of the opportunity by invading Indochina from China in late September.²⁴ The French garrison at Lang Son near the China border withdrew slowly down the main road through Bac Son district, and for a week its retreat was harried by fairly well organized Tho Montagnard guerrilla bands, some of them Party-led, including one by the legendary Tran Dang Ninh. Some French troops turned their weapons over to the guerrillas for use against the advancing Japanese. Those developments frightened both the arriving Japanese and the French

EARLY VIETNAMESE COMMUNIST-CONTROLLED MILITARY UNITS AS LISTED BY HANOI HISTORIANS

Date Formed	Name of Unit	Location (Province)	Number of Men	Commander
June 1930	Ba Xa Red Guards (Ve Binh Do)	Ha Tinh	30	—
Aug. 1940	Bac Son Guerilla Unit (Du Kich Bach Son)	Lang Son	200	Tran Dang Ninh
Feb. 1941	First National Salvation Army Platoon	Lang Son	125	Chu Van Tan
Sept. 1941	Second National Salvation Army Platoon	Bac Thai	47	Hoang Quoc Viet
Late 1941	Cao Bang Armed Unit	Cao Bang	12	—
Feb. 1944	Third National Salvation Army Platoon	Ha Tuyen	125	—
Dec. 1944	Liberation Armed-Propaganda Brigade	Cao Bang	34	Vo Nguyen Giap
Mar. 1945	Ba To Guerilla Unit	Quang Ngai	28	Nguyen Chanh and Pham Kiet
Mar. 1945	National Salvation Army	Bac Son	50	Phung Chi Kien
Mar. 1945	My Tho Guerilla Force (3 platoons)	Ben Tre My Tho	—	—
May 1945	Quang Trung Resistance Base Guerilla Platoon	Hoa Binh, Ninh Binh, and Thanh Hoa	40	Van Tien Dung
June 1945	Dong Trieu (also known as Hung Dao) Anti-Japanese Unit	Quang Ninh	—	Hai Sanh, Tran Sung, and Nguyen Binh

command in Hanoi, and a loose collaboration against this native insurgency was quickly arranged. The newly fielded guerrilla force was crushed. But at Bac Son the Party's dogs of war were unleashed.²⁵

By the time Party leaders gathered in Dinh Bang village, Bac Ninh province (outside Hanoi), for the Party's Seventh Plenum in November 1940, pressure had increased sharply for an all-out army-building effort. In the course of the Plenum a complete policy turnaround occurred, although it was apparently less a matter of a new consensus than an outcome of factional infighting (Ho Chi Minh, who was not present, apparently did not approve).²⁶ The change was made in the manner peculiar to communist ruling circles, that is, a switch without apparently making a switch. The much-criticized thinking of the Sixth Plenum and its position on armed struggle now were embraced as though they had been the offspring of the critics:

The Seventh Plenum confirmed that the shift in strategic direction [that is, to armed *dau tranh*], assuming the task of national liberation and temporarily shelving the slogan of agrarian reform [land collectivization] which had been decided at the Sixth Plenum, were all judicious. The importance of the Seventh Plenum was to approve the introduction of armed *dau tranh* into the agenda of the Indochina revolution. . . . The Plenum also decided to set up a Provisional Party Central Committee, and to re-establish contact with the Comintern.²⁷

The change was pushed through by a faction led by Tran Dang Ninh, fresh from the Bac Son failure (he brushed it aside as an aberration), that included Phung Chi Kien, Luong Huu Chi, and Hoang Van Thu—all important early figures. A directive was issued creating a united front armed force to be called the National Salvation Army. An army in spirit only, perhaps, it consisted of three guerrilla units numbering about 125 persons each, mostly Montagnards. The first of these, formed in February 1941, was called the First National Salvation Platoon, commanded by Chu Van Tan, a Nung described as “a local bandit,”²⁸ who apparently was not a party member at the time but a key figure since he could deliver Montagnard manpower and provide a Highland enclave as a haven for the fledgling force. Tan went on to become one of PAVN's senior generals.

The National Salvation Army was a true revolutionary force.²⁹ It was broad in concept and purpose, dedicated not only to ridding Indochina of foreign control but to establishing some form of self-government. Exactly how much influence the Party exerted initially is not clear. The army's many Montagnard members were xenophobic but not of advanced political consciousness. Further, Ho and other top Party officials, ever reluctant to commit their cause to full *dau tranh*, temporized in public association, fearful that if the National Salvation Army failed it could take the Party down with it. The association did move the Party from *self-defense* to *army* in official designation. Probably the best that can be said is that the National Salvation Army initially involved Party participation, and only hedged Party support.

Ho Chi Minh finally returned to the region—the first time he had set foot in Vietnam since 1912—on 28 February 1941, apparently with plans well worked out in his mind for the creation of an armed force to launch armed *dau tranh*. Those plans were unveiled at the Party's Eighth Plenum in Kwangsi, China, in May 1941.

The Eighth Plenum officially determined that armed *dau tranh* would be conducted through a united front, by a united front army. The concept of the united front—brainchild of Lenin and certainly one of the great political inventions of the twentieth century—is an association of organizations dedicated to some single objective and open to all groups willing to embrace that objective, in this case the expulsion from Indochina of Japanese aggressors and French colonialists. The front was called the Vietnam Independence League,³⁰ or the Viet Minh, as it became known colloquially.

Viet Minh membership was more noncommunist (or anti-communist) than communist, and Party participation, while fully known within the Viet Minh, was not advertised externally and thus not generally known by most Vietnamese, nor by many foreigners. Its chairman was Ho Ngoc Lam, a noncommunist. Ho Chi Minh, as the gray eminence behind the Viet Minh, granted great latitude to non-Party elements so as to encourage their support and allay their fears and also because the Viet Minh was based in China and thus heavily dependent on the suspicious Chinese Nationalists. In fact, the Chinese Nationalists earlier re-

moved Ho from the scene by jailing him for two years. Even so, in the decade of the 1940s, under his skilled hand—Ho had no peer in the art of “organization slaying,” using one organization to co-opt, absorb, or destroy another—the Viet Minh was kept under Party control, then gradually taken over entirely.

During World War II, the Viet Minh operated from its bases in China and, aided and equipped by the Allies, recruited guerrillas (a large percentage of them Montagnards), organized them into bands, trained them, and fielded them in Vietnam, where they harassed the Japanese, spied for the Allies, rescued downed American airmen, and generally served the Allied cause. That the Viet Minh contribution to Allied victory was only marginal was chiefly a reflection of the fact that Indochina was among the least important of Allied theaters of operation.

While deeply involved in Viet Minh military activity, at that time the Party also began separate parallel military developmental efforts. Shortly before the Party's Seventh Plenum (November 1940) the Chinese Nationalists sponsored a military conference, which was in effect an introductory seminar on guerrilla war, at Kweilin, China, for Party cadres and others in the Viet Minh. The discussions continued on into the Seventh Plenum. Attending those sessions were refugee Party cadres from the Saigon region who had fled to China after their initial failure in armed *dau tranh*. Those southerners were questioned closely by Giap about their experiences, and many of them became his first military cadres and the nucleus of the PAVN officer corps.

Giap dispatched Vu Anh into the Pac Bo region of Cao Bang province after the Seventh Plenum with instructions to scout a secure headquarters site inside Vietnam. He located an area about ten miles square between the villages of Hoang Hoa Tham and Tran Hung Dao, which is almost due north of Hanoi just inside the border with China. The choice underscored Giap's early realization of the importance of sanctuary in guerrilla war.

The caves of Cao Bang became the initial military headquarters for the Party, the training ground for Giap's new military force, and, at times, home for Ho Chi Minh. The site consciously or otherwise emulated the mystic experience of Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese communists in the caves at Yennan. The Cao Bang site is now a national shrine.³¹

There in the mountains, Giap, some 40 Vietnamese cadres, and 500 Montagnard guards threw themselves into the task of learning how to build an armed force. Giap wrote, thought, planned, and schemed. He had Chinese Nationalist advisors, his notes and other materials collected during a two-year stay in China,³² as well as knowledge obtained earlier from his study of history. For two years the effort proceeded apace, revolving around Giap more than around Ho or Pham Van Dong, as the small band of cadres³³ sought to ground itself in the complex business of making war—learning strategy and tactics, testing the techniques of recruitment and training, and mastering the difficulties of logistics and materiel procurement. Giap honed what was his natural genius: not strategic brilliance, but military-management ability.

Guerrilla bands were formed, and they conducted experimental raids and other military operations. Forays were launched into nearby villages, where meetings were staged. Cadres gained experience, learning ways to raise the revolutionary consciousness of the villagers. Teams of intelligence agents went into action, as did “jungle telegraph” communication-system operators and covert-purchasing agents—not so much to accomplish something specific as to add to the sum of knowledge. Giap learned those early lessons well. He became extremely well skilled in the art of gaining access to the enemy’s sources of supply and in knowing how to make do when such war materiel was unavailable. He learned how to move men and supplies around a battlefield far faster than anyone had a right to expect. He became what Bernard Fall later termed “a logistics general genius.” He and his cadres also learned the importance of advertising the guerrilla’s cause and of creating the proper image. Finally, they learned how best to work with villagers without being betrayed by them.

Between mid-1942 and mid-1944 Giap and his cadres created the theoretical base for a new kind of warfare conducted by a new kind of revolutionary force. It was, in effect, a two-year self-taught course in the theory and practice of armed *dau tranh* during which abstraction was translated into the reality of day-to-day military actions.

What was most remarkable about the effort was its breadth

of vision. This was no mere romantic guerrilla war interlude. Giap's thinking (and Ho's, of course) was long range—past the time of guerrilla raids, beyond even the defeat of Japan in world war. Giap knew he needed something far more sophisticated than a simple combat force, so he sought what was still some undevised military mechanism that would place premium on organization and primary emphasis on mobilization and motivation and thus harness social pressure, the strongest force in any society. Giap knew that to win he must have a new kind of military force, not just to achieve victory for the Party, but for the time beyond victory. As Joseph Buttinger noted:

The communists knew better than anyone else knew that the popularity of a movement, although an indispensable condition for revolution, was in itself no guarantee of success. . . . [They] needed a military force not only to crush the internal enemies of the Viet Minh revolution but also to resist an attempt to undo it.³⁴

By September 1944 Giap and his cadres were ready, and Ho and the Party deemed that *thoi co* had arrived. A Party military conference, the first ever, was staged; a draft directive on military organization was circulated and explained (and later issued at the Party Plenum in December 1944). It unveiled the basic concept of the future Party-run PAVN as it had been determined on the basis of experimentation by Giap in the caves of Cao Bang.

Central to the concept was the new military institution labeled the Armed Propaganda Team. Probably it did not seem to be much of an idea at the time, particularly to the experienced military men in attendance, and even today it is not appreciated outside of Vietnam. The first of three Armed Propaganda Teams was formed that fall in the Dinh Ca Valley of Cao Bang—thirty-four persons with Giap in command.³⁵ It was armed, Giap wrote later, with two revolvers and thirty-one rifles, of which fourteen were flintlocks that had seen action in the Russo-Japanese War. The date was 22 December 1944, now observed as the birthdate of PAVN:

This was a decisive turning point. These first [armed propaganda] units were set up during the upsurge of the people's

armed *dau tranh*. They were composed of Party members or revolutionary elements, highly conscious politically and carefully selected among the members of the workers' and peasants' associations, the communist Youth League and other revolutionary organizations. Their main activities consisted in carrying out armed propaganda and fighting to raise the masses' revolutionary spirit and encourage them to armed insurrection.³⁶

Giap later described the moment thus:

Uncle Ho laid down the tasks for creating a liberation army. The Vietnam Armed Propaganda Army for National Liberation. Its task was to use armed *dau tranh* to mobilize the people and call on them to rise up. At the beginning the line of action was to give more attention to political activities and propaganda work than to military activities and operations. . . .

Uncle Ho then guided me in working out a concrete plan; how to organize the unit, how to judge its effectiveness, where to recruit men. . . . It took a whole day to map out the plan. Views continued to be exchanged far into the night.³⁷

Giap credits Ho as the man who hit on the initial concept of the Armed Propaganda Team. That may be simple deference, but more likely—considering the types of minds of the two—Ho did conceive of it, then turned it over to Giap to translate into reality.³⁸

Since only the few initiates from the Cao Bang caves knew what the term "armed propaganda team" meant, the first unit was also dubbed the Tran Hung Dao Platoon, named after an early Vietnamese hero known to all.³⁹

Ho Chi Minh, the ever-mindful pragmatist, reiterated to Giap as the new military organization was unveiled the need to advertise it and the importance of correct image. Both could be achieved in an initial bold military action: on Christmas Day 1944 the First Armed Propaganda Platoon attacked two French mud-fort outposts at Phai Khat and Na Ngan. It was a perfect assault. The two French lieutenants were killed, the Vietnamese troops in the two garrisons surrendered without loss, and there were no casualties among the attackers. The neatness of the outcome is suspicious enough to suggest it had been prearranged among all

on both sides, except for the two unfortunate French officers. The attack served to introduce the Armed Propaganda Team to Vietnam.

Armed Propaganda Team

The concept of the Armed Propaganda Team⁴⁰ should be more widely understood for there is true genius in this instrument of revolution, one that has lost none of its potency in recent years. The term is not what it might suggest to the uninitiated. It is well-named providing the term *propaganda* is accepted in its proper Leninist meaning⁴¹ and not with the usual Western definition that has to do with repetitious, hackneyed sloganizing. The teams were "armed" but only for defensive purposes or for occasional spectacular military gestures to advertise the cause. The teams were never to use weapons to intimidate the villagers, for that was self-defeating. Teams went into the villages of Vietnam to energize and motivate, to raise the villagers' revolutionary consciousness, not by threat or use of force, only by means of communication and persuasion. Changed villager outlook, however, could not become permanent unless the villager was enmeshed in a Party-guided organizational net. Hence, although the team's purpose was mobilization, most day-to-day activity was organizational. The villagers, of course, were parochial, suspicious, often hidebound traditionalists. It was no easy task to break the communicational ice, and only gifted cadres seemed to be able to do it well.

Establishing operational revolutionary organizations in the villages was even more difficult. The standard approach was to find a few villagers, usually young and attracted to the cause, recruit them as organizers, and build a village structure around them. Then the team would depart for the next village, to return in a few months for further developmental work or, if necessary, to begin all over again. Sometimes the teams were betrayed, but they pressed the campaign. Soon the seeds of organization began to grow, and in some, but not all, of the villages a firm foundation was rooted.

The teams operated only on brief general instructions, set down originally—legend has it—by Ho Chi Minh in a message smuggled to Giap in a cigarette package. Its central slogan was:

Political action is more important than military action; propaganda is more important than fighting.⁴² The theme stressed constantly by the cadres was mobilize, mobilize, mobilize.

Specific instructions, dated December 1944 and signed by Ho Chi Minh, explained use of the term “armed propaganda” to mean:

Politics is more important than military affairs. It is a propaganda unit. In order to operate effectively from a military standpoint, the primary principle is concentration of forces. Therefore, according to the new directive, cadres and determined, enthusiastic members will be selected from among the ranks of the Cao-Bac-Lang guerrilla units, which will be centralized into a large armed element. Because our resistance is one by all of the people, it is necessary to mobilize and arm all of the people. With regard to local armed units: train local cadres who can in turn go to the localities and pass on their experiences, maintain clear communications and coordinate operations. With regard to tactics: fully employ the guerrilla tactics of secrecy, speed, activeness, mobility, stealth, and flexible maneuver. The Armed Propaganda Unit is a permanent military unit and it is hoped there will quickly be more of them. Although small in scope at the beginning, they have made brilliant progress so far. They are the starting point of the Liberation Army that will travel from North to South Vietnam and throughout the country.⁴³

The idea of the Armed Propaganda Team served the Party cause well in the Viet Minh War. It was the initial institutional weapon in the South in the formation of the armed force of the National Liberation Front. It was tried with apparent initial success by the Vietnamese in Kampuchea as a means of ridding the peninsula of Pol Pot, only unaccountably to be abandoned in favor of Western-style warfare. The idea has been tried elsewhere, in Thailand, for instance, with less success. Its utility has not been exhausted, however, nor has the world heard the last of the Armed Propaganda Team.

PAVN Emerges

The development of the Party's new military creation was a parallel process, the evolution of two separate but intricately intertwined military elements, one Party, the other united front.

The earliest Self-Defense groups (circa 1935) were Party but little more than static internal guards. Then came the Armed Self-Defense groups, also Party, and (in 1940) the National Salvation Units, which were united front. The Bac Son guerrilla units (1940) were united front; the Armed Propaganda Teams (1944) were Party.

From 15 to 20 April 1945 what was called the Tonkin Revolutionary Military Conference, chaired by Truong Chinh, was held outside Hanoi and was attended by representatives of various armed elements from across Indochina—Self-Defense units, guerrilla bands, Phuc Quoc groups, and Armed Propaganda Teams. It was the Party effort to unite into a single united front armed force with a single command all of the disparate forces. The result was the creation of the Vietnam Liberation Army, formally proclaimed in ceremonies at the Bien Thuong Buddhist temple in Cho Chu village, Thai Nhuyen province, on 15 May 1945. It was presided over by Vo Nguyen Giap, who became commander in chief.

In advance of the formation of the Vietnam Liberation Army, the Party in late 1944 had created, under its Central Committee, the Revolutionary Military Committee, later to be called the Central Military Party Committee (CMPC), which still exists. Initially it had four members: Giap, Van Tien Dung, Le Thanh Nghi and Tran Dang Ninh.

General Giap led the new armed force into its first battle on 16 August 1945, an attack from Tan Trao, Tuyen Quang province, on Thai Nguyen town, which marked the “liberation” of Vietnam; the following month the Vietnam Liberation Army was renamed the Vietnam National Defense Army.

On 2 September 1945 in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh officially proclaimed the independence of Vietnam (a proclamation also signed by Giap) and announced the formation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. A Ministry of National Defense was created with the ministerial portfolio going to a noncommunist. Giap, at that time the second most powerful DRV figure, became Minister of the Interior.⁴⁴ Gen. Hoang Van Thai later described events during the next year:

Immediately after our people took political power throughout the country, President Ho posed the necessity of organizing

command and leadership organs for the armed forces. On September 7, 1945 only five days after the Declaration of Independence, President Ho decided to set up the General Staff. . . . He said, "The General Staff is hereby established to command the army throughout the nation. The General Staff is a secret military organ of the mass organization [Viet Minh organization] and is the headquarters organ of the army. It has the mission of building a strong army, skillfully training troops, clearly understanding ourselves and the enemy, using clever stratagems, and organizing a command that is unified, secret, responsive, accurate and prompt, so as to defeat all enemies. . . ." During the first days of the DRV Uncle Ho ordered the formation of the Political Department, which later was developed into the Political General Department to do Party work and political work in the army; and the formation of the Quartermaster Bureau, which later became the Rear Services General Department, to meet the army's material needs. In January 1946, Uncle Ho and the Party Central Committee decided to set up the Central Military Party Committee to help the Party organizations in the army.⁴⁵

A year later the National Defense Council was created (discussed below) and Giap was made chairman, giving him more direct control of the new armed force. During this period, the French had returned to Indochina in force, opposed by the newly formed DRV with its army—about 1,000 men in thirteen infantry companies—until it was driven into the hills behind Hanoi. In the next few years the armed force went through several name changes until officially becoming the *Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam*, or People's Army of Vietnam.⁴⁶

The Viet Minh structure at that point consisted of an incipient state, a united front mass political organization, and a fledgling army. The DRV as government—or more correctly as administrative system—was local only but was rooted in the social fabric in such a way that it controlled much of the rural area despite the presence of a large enemy force. The structure clandestinely duplicated the Franco-Vietnamese district-village administration with what the French called parallel hierarchies. In those areas with little or nominal enemy military presence, administration of affairs was handled by a local Administrative Committee (*Uy Ban Hanh Chinh Xa*), guided by local or imported Party cadres. Above the village was the intervillage group (*lien*

xa) and over it the district committee, usually called the Resistance Administration Committee (*Uy Ban Khang Chien Hang Chinh*), which initially had various military and quasi-military tasks that later were split off and given to PAVN. Above the district—the province (*tin*h), zone (*kh*u), and interzone (*lien kh*u)—the organization was largely military command structure, not civil administration.

Army building under careful Party guidance in those early years slowly picked up momentum and critical mass, a performance that was a triumph of clandestinism. Lucien Bodard, in his highly readable book, *The Quicksand War*, described it firsthand:

So Giap's People's Army gathered in the almost impenetrable secrecy of the Communist world and the obscurity of the jungle. The French, who knew everything in general and nothing in particular, did their utmost to pierce this secrecy wherever they could and gain some scraps of strategic intelligence from it. Planes took aerial photographs, but the results showed only the uninterrupted sea of forest. Patrols went out on reconnaissance, but they did not push far enough, to the places that mattered, for that would mean destruction. If prisoners were taken during these raids, they never knew anything, even if they could be induced to talk, not even the names of their officers or the number of their unit. This was often a genuine ignorance, for nothing had a name in the Vietminh army; or if it did, then it was a false name, and often changed.⁴⁷

Outside of the Viet Minh zone, chiefly in the cities, political struggle programs sought to undercut indigenous Vietnamese support for the French. They were directed against the Government of Vietnam (GVN), mostly in the form of disorganizational techniques designed to shatter its viability. Many top officials were forced to flee to China to join the country's nominal leader, Emperor Bao Dai. In 1949 the French persuaded Bao Dai to return to Vietnam to head what was, or was to become, an independent government within the French Union. The political struggle between that government and the Viet Minh/DRV continued throughout the Viet Minh War. It should be kept in mind that from start to finish Giap was engaged in a civil war, if not ideologically, certainly geographically and organizationally, that is,

in terms of the number of “loyalist” Vietnamese. There were at the start about 55,000 Vietnamese in the French colonial army. In the South the Viet Minh War was largely a matter of Vietnamese vs. Vietnamese. Even at the height of revolutionary fervor in November and December 1945, the French in Saigon, Hue, and Da Nang were able to recruit 18,000 men. By the end of the Viet Minh War there were, however benighted or misguided, some 400,000 Vietnamese fighting under French leadership (1 percent of them officers).

Notes—Chapter 1

1. Nguyen Khac Vien, *Vietnam 1978* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1978).
2. Tran Van Dinh, "The Vietnam People's Army," *Indochina Chronicle*, 28 Feb. 1974. The writings of David Marr also contain passages that illustrate this sense of a martial spirit as it has been incorporated into Vietnamese Marxism. See his *Vietnam Tradition on Trial: 1920–1945*. Recent Hanoi materials that illustrate this writing include "Our National Tradition: All People Are Soldiers" by Le Dinh Sy, *Tap Chi Cong San*, no. 12, Dec. 1982, and "They Brazenly Distort Vietnamese History" by Van Tan, in the same magazine, Feb. 1983, which describes centuries of Vietnamese mobilization efforts against China.
3. *A Century of National Struggles*, *Vietnamese Studies* series, no. 24.
4. Quoted by the author in his *History of Vietnamese Communism 1925–1976*, p. 12.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Tap Chi Cong San*, Jan. 1983.
7. *Our Military Traditions*, *Vietnamese Studies* series, no. 55.
8. Le Duan, quoted by Tran Van Dinh, "The Vietnam People's Army."
9. Originally and briefly in early 1930 known as the Vietnamese Communist Party and later in that year as the Indochinese Communist Party; in 1951 it became Dang Lao Dong (Worker's Party), and in 1976 once again the Vietnamese Communist Party.
10. The Indochinese Communist Party's *Political Thesis*, 1930.
11. "Vietnam's Revolutionary Army," *Vietnam Courier*, no. 32, Jan. 1975.
12. In Vietnamese, *Cac Doi Tu Ve Do*.
13. Nghe-Tinh is a contraction of the two northern provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh, the center of the armed uprisings against the French.
14. Vietnam News Agency, "History of PAVN," 22 Dec. 1984.
15. For fuller explanation of *dau tranh*, see Chapter 5.
16. Van Tien Dung, "PAVN: 40 Years of Combat and Construction" *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Dec. 1984.
17. See *Documentary History of the Vietnam War on Microfilm*, vol. 1, Chap. 3, First Party Congress document. See also "Resolution of Self-Defense Units, March 28, 1935," "Party Military Documents," *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Jan. 1970.
18. For a recent evaluation of the *thoi co* concept, see Lt. Gen. Hoang Minh Thao, "The Art of Seizing Opportunity," *Tap Chi Cong San*, no. 12, Dec. 1983. General Thao quotes a Ho Chi Minh poem that catches the spirit:

Be broad of vision, complete of thought
Be determined, constantly on the offensive;

A wrong move can lose two knights.
At the correct moment, one pawn can deliver victory.

19. Giap, *Arm the Revolutionary Masses*, p. 97.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
23. Sixth Plenum Political Report, Nov. 1939.
24. The Japanese were aided by Vietnamese collaborators, chiefly members of the Phuc Quoc (National Salvation) organization founded by Phan Boi Chau, who were armed with old Japanese weapons.
25. For details of this period, see John T. McAlister *Vietnam: The Origins of Revolution (1885–1946)*, pp. 53–55.
26. *Documentary History of the Vietnam War on Microfilm*, vol. 4, Chap. 14.
27. *FLDH, History of the August Revolution*, p. 90.
28. There seems to be some confusion over who was the first commander of the First National Salvation Platoon, Chu Van Tan or Phung Chi Kien. Three platoons were formed during World War II: the First in Cao Bang Province, the Second in Bac Son Province in September 1941, and the Third in Tuyen Quang Province in February 1944.
29. The term *national salvation* (*cuu quoc*) has special emotive qualities for all Vietnamese. It was the organizing instrument used to rally support against the French and then the Japanese in World War II. Many of the resistance movements in Vietnam today employ the term in their names.
30. In Vietnamese, *Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi*.
31. For a description of the site, see *Vietnam Courier* Nov. 1984. In 1979, during the Chinese invasion, the Cao Bang shrine was totally destroyed by the Chinese, even to the extent that the roads leading into it from China were bulldozed.
32. Giap supplies a personalized account of life in the Cao Bang region during these years in a chapter titled “Stemming from the People” in *A Heroic People: Memoirs of the Revolution*.
33. Vietnamese POWs have insisted to the author that Giap was more of a nominal leader or mentor for those first military elements—that Hoang Sam was the actual commander and Xich Thang the chief Political Commissar.
34. Joseph Buttinger, *The Dragon Embattled*, N.Y.: Praeger & Co., 1967, p. 273.
35. Some Vietnamese assert that Chu Van Tan, not Giap, was the first PAVN commander. Strictly speaking, Giap’s team was formed second in Thanh Hoa province, in July 1941.
36. Vo Nguyen Giap, *Heroic People*, p. 142.

37. *Ibid.*

38. It is difficult to assess Ho Chi Minh's skill as a guerrilla leader. Giap, in *Days With Ho Chi Minh*, (Foreign Language Pub. House, Hanoi, 1975) writes that in the 1930s Ho produced three pamphlets on the subject, titled respectively, "Guerrilla Tactics," "Experience in Guerrilla Warfare in Russia," and "Experience in Guerrilla Warfare in China," which were used as texts at the Cao Bang camp. None is known to be extant.

39. Organizationally the teams initially were to be part of a broader military entity called the Cao Bang Self-Defense Organization, a catch-all of military elements more or less under Party control.

40. In Vietnamese, *Doi Vo Trang Tuyen Truyen*. The term is variously translated, even by the official historians in Hanoi, as "unit," "brigade," or "team." The latter, it seems, more accurately conveys the spirit of the idea.

41. As used by Leninist communicators, *propaganda* as well as *agitation* are technical terms, whereas elsewhere they are merely pejorative. Both have to do with the manner and substance of communicating ideas. *Propaganda*, as defined by Lenin, means "many ideas to the few." *Agitation* is "few ideas to the many." An example of the first would be a *Pravda* editorial or a lecture at a Marxist study group; an example of the second would be a cadre addressing factory workers as they eat their noon lunch, telling them the Party stands for two things: bread and peace. Propaganda ideas are more intellectual, almost elitist, while agitation ideas are proletarian, practical, and concrete.

42. For Ho Chi Minh's writings on the armed propaganda team, see Ho's "Instructions on Establishing the Vietnam Propaganda Unit for National Liberation," *Selected Works*, vol. 2, pp. 145–56 and *Historic Documents of the Lao Dong Party* (1970).

43. *Ibid.*

44. Because politics dictated, a noncommunist headed the Viet Minh Ministry of Defense.

45. Hoang Van Thai, *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Sept. 1982.

46. *Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam* is sometimes translated as Vietnam People's Army (VPA). People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) is used throughout this book.

47. Lucien Bodard, *The Quicksand War*, Boston: Little Brown, 1967, p. 336.

CHAPTER 2

The Early Years

The Viet Minh's armed force in the first years of its existence was little more than a collection of guerrilla bands, poorly armed either by sporadic Allied efforts during World War II or out of French and Japanese stocks captured in the chaotic weeks following the end of the war. The force stood at about 60,000 after the first year of the Viet Minh War and ended that war with about 380,000 men,¹ of whom about 120,000 were what were termed "regulars," the remainder being "regionals" and "locals." The "regular" force was organized into 600-man infantry battalions (administratively grouped into regiments of four battalions each but normally operating as battalions), of which there were about twenty-nine in all, plus eight heavy-weapons battalions.² In September 1951 the first full PAVN infantry division—called the Vanguard Division, officially formed in August 1949—went into action. Later, with the increased advent of artillery, came what were called "heavy divisions." Many, if not most, of the early PAVN units were organized along ethnic lines. The 308th Division, called the Capital Division, for instance, was made up of ethnic Vietnamese, most of whom were from Hanoi. The 316th Division was largely Tho Montagnards; the 335th Division, Thai Montagnards; and similar units included mainly Hre and Jarai.

A great deal of the day-to-day battle in the Viet Minh War fell on the shoulders of the regional forces and local militia units. In some portions of the country, the Mekong Delta for instance, they were the only significant PAVN force. The local militia units were used chiefly for reconnaissance activity, for supply and logistics work, and for reinforcements in battle. The regional forces were employed for much of the small-scale day-to-day attack and harassment of the French. The regulars were used sparingly,

committed only to battles of strategic importance, such as the 1950 campaign to push French forces back from the China border region, the attempted capture of Hanoi in 1951, or the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

There is no need here to detail the Viet Minh War for there are many good works available.³ Let it suffice to set forth briefly the general sweep of events as PAVN historians reconstructed later.⁴ The war is divisible into five phases. The first phase was the attempted "beach-head elimination," that is, the 1945–46 effort to prevent the return of the French army, an experiment in regular-force warfare of about six months' duration. It failed but not so abysmally as to cause loss of confidence, and probably General Giap and others from the start believed it would not be successful.

Then came the retreat to the hills above Hanoi and the start of armed and political struggle in the context of protracted conflict, regarded by the French as simple low-level guerrilla warfare. It was, however, for PAVN cadres a time of intensive mobilization and motivation work among rural Vietnamese and of consolidation and building of military force. Battles were not sought generally, although they were fought defensively so as to disrupt French and GVN village-level rule and prevent peace. The most important military event of the period was the successful effort to carve out a secure headquarters, the campaign of October 1950, launched from China, that established a strip of border territory as a PAVN base from which the Viet Minh was never dislodged.⁵

The third phase, beginning in the spring of 1951, was an abortive effort to move into the Maoist definition of third-level guerrilla war, that is, large units sent against enemy installations. Important battles were lost at Na San and elsewhere during this attempt and the conclusion forced on Giap was that his planned "general counteroffensive," as he termed it, was premature.

Thus PAVN retreated into phase four of the war, what Giap called the "strategically defensive phase" of 1952–53, essentially a time of rebuilding and force augmentation.

Then came the final, fifth, phase, the "general counteroffensive" phase of 1954.⁶ Even then the war tended to drag on some-

what inconclusively until its culmination at the battle of Dien Bien Phu, which psychologically, if not militarily, shattered French determination⁷ and sent the two sides to Geneva, where they wrote an end to French colonialism in Indochina.⁸

At the time of victory, at the end of the Viet Minh War, PAVN was still a united front military force. It contained, for instance, Catholic battalions operating in the South under the Viet Minh banner. But the basic structure of PAVN as a national armed force had been established. It remained only for the Party to “regularize” it. Gradually control mechanisms were introduced and perfected, and PAVN became less and less united front, more and more Party.

During the 300 days of the regroupment process—called Operation Exodus in the South—which had been arranged at Geneva, some 900,000 persons moved from North to South and about 80,000 of the 90,000 pro-Hanoi Viet Minh troops in the South moved to the North. The remaining 10,000, concentrated in some five remote district-size areas of the South, were told to remain as a hedge against failure of the unification of Vietnam, which supposedly was to follow the Geneva Conference. Most of the 10,000-man force was still in the South in 1960 and formed the core of the united front People’s Liberation Army created by the National Liberation Front in December 1960.

PAVN in North Vietnam at that time numbered about 200,000. It was no longer a guerrilla army, but neither was it a modern armed force. General Giap and the Party set out to correct that.

At the 12th Party Plenum in March 1957 plans for the new PAVN were unveiled:

The Plenum discussed and issued resolutions on . . . building up the army and consolidating national defense. . . . The Plenum discussed the mission and motto of developing the army, [also] the task of guiding the building of the army and consolidating national defense . . . and strengthening Party leadership [of PAVN] in order to promote these tasks. . . . The Plenum set forth the army-building slogan: Positively Build a Powerful People’s Army and Gradually Advance to Professionalism and Modernization . . . [including] building a foundation for armed forces branches and combat arms. . . . The 12th Plenum of the

Party Central Committee had a very important significance with regard to the application of Marxism-Leninism to building up our people's armed forces.⁹

Under these directives PAVN was reorganized, the size of its military elements enlarged, support units added, formal regulations on military service introduced, and a standardized system of ranks, insignia, and pay installed. A tight system of Party controls, through the Political Officer, was introduced. Military academies were opened and military assistance was solicited from abroad, chiefly from China. Under the 12th Plenum directive, universal military conscription was established in the DRV. It launched plans for the formation of new combat arms to support the infantry—a tank corps, for example, formally dedicated 5 October 1959. In short, it began a campaign to turn PAVN into as fully professional a modern army as the DRV's limited resources would permit.

Unification

The great unfinished task of the Vietnamese revolution as defined by Hanoi in the late 1950s was unification of North and South Vietnam under its banner—or, as seen in Saigon, conquest of the noncommunist South by the communist North.

PAVN, of course, was cast into a central role in the drive to achieve unification. In the South it required major structural change, and that was ordered by the 12th Plenum. In advance of the Plenum, Le Duan, as a member of the Central Military Party Committee, had been dispatched to the South (apparently in August 1956) to assess the situation firsthand and to begin the reorganizational work required for the eventual start of armed *dau tranh*. A Politburo resolution dated June 1956 formally ordered the restructuring of the southern *apparatus*, Party and PAVN alike. In October 1957, in keeping with that directive, an augmented guerrilla force, called Unit 250, was fielded. It consisted, at least on paper, of thirty companies of guerrillas in western Nam Bo, five in central Nam Bo, and two in Tay Ninh and Thu Dau Mot provinces of eastern Nam Bo. The two companies in eastern Nam Bo expanded rapidly and within a year had become a full battalion, located in what came to be called War Zone D. It was from there that Minh Thanh village in Thu Dau Mot prov-

ince was attacked on 10 August 1957 and twenty village defenders claimed killed, forty weapons and ten vehicles captured. It can be said that that attack marked the beginning of the Vietnam War.

The Zone D force continued to grow, and in mid-1978 the eastern Nam Bo command was formed, comprising three companies of guerrillas (75–100 men each) and a sapper company of 65 men (which also had a team capable of producing mines and other explosive devices).

At the famed 15th Plenum of May 1959—certainly PAVN's single most historically significant moment—the Party assessed the scene in the South and concluded that *thoi co*, the proper moment, to begin armed *dau tranh* strategy had come.

Orders were issued accordingly:

The Plenum reviewed the situation since the signing of The Geneva Agreements (1954) and set forth the revolutionary line for the nation as a whole and for the South . . . [and] determined that the basic missions of the Revolution in the South were to use violence . . . armed struggle along with political struggle to liberate the South . . . and build a united Vietnam.¹⁰

The theme of the Plenum resolution was unification, one Vietnam under the Party's banner. That goal, of course, had been the intention of Ho Chi Minh and other early figures since the start, and the specific objective since partition after the Viet Minh War. The Party never hid that fact, as even a casual inspection of official documents and leaders' speeches over the years amply demonstrates.¹¹ Strategy employed in the South—on the battlefield and later at the Paris talks—always turned on, was always defined in terms of, the goal of unification. What changed—in 1959—was the *how* of unification. Previously, in the aftermath of the 1954 Geneva conference, the strategy pursued was, in official parlance, “political struggle to demand the other side observe the Geneva Agreements.” Unification was, in effect, to be brought about through French diplomacy. When that failed it was replaced by what was called “the strategy of conserving forces while moving to the offensive stage of local uprisings”—in other words, a holding operation as mobilization work went forward. The ba-

sic guiding document, the bible, in fact, for this period from 1956 to 1960, was Le Duan's 1956 *Political Report: The Revolutionary Line in the South*. It was translated into specific policies at the Nam Bo Interzone Party Central Committee meeting in December 1956. In essence it called for creation of Armed Propaganda Teams, then more offensive-type guerrilla units, and finally a standard armed force.

Such was the scenario followed in the 1950s. By 1960 the time had come to create the NLF's People's Liberation Army (PLA), a united front armed force, later named the People's Liberation Armed Force (PLAF). To it was assigned the burden of liberating the South to permit unification. The Party and PAVN began supplying the PLAF with doctrinal know-how and key leadership personnel. It admonished the PLAF that it must be self-supporting and self-contained, in keeping with the principles of people's war and not rely on or make requests of the North. Then and later, however, it always stood ready to meet any critical need.¹² Officially, Hanoi denied involvement in the struggle in the South. In part that denial was dictated by its negotiational strategy—resting on the 1954 Geneva Agreements, which specifically forbade PAVN south of the 17th parallel. In part it was an effort to create the appearance of an indigenous NLF that had no association with Hanoi, except, perhaps, fraternal ties. Every top leader, virtually every member of the Politburo, went on record as flatly denying that Hanoi and PAVN were participating in the war in the South. After the war came a great reversal and floods of histories, anniversary messages, and memoirs that recount in great detail the deep involvement of PAVN and the North, and, in some instances, far earlier than anyone had realized. For example, Party histories now record that as early as June 1956 the Politburo, in effect, had concluded that unification was not going to be achieved through French diplomacy and that some basic change in organizational approach was required:

The revolutionary movement [in the South] demands guidance that is appropriate to the situation undergoing new developments. . . . Our Revolution in the South is national. . . . It is extremely important that we endeavor to build up the revolutionary forces. . . . This does not preclude armed self-defense under certain circumstances. . . . It is necessary to consolidate

the existing armed and semi-armed forces and create bases of support.¹³

The history adds that in October 1957 the Politburo, “implementing a June 1956 Resolution . . . organized Unit 250 in the Nam Bo [South] Interzone . . . of 37 armed companies.”¹⁴ In mid-1958, it adds, the Eastern Nam Bo Command was created, consisting of nine separate military elements (which are described in some detail), including even an “arsenal to produce land mines.”¹⁵

Official Hanoi history that is being written today reverses the record of northern military noninvolvement in the war in the South. Whereas during the 1960s and early 1970s Hanoi officially denied any part in the struggle other than offering the PLAF moral support—a denial widely accepted in the United States during those years—the portrayal today is of early and extensive northern commitment. Hanoi’s military historians writing now of the PLAF record that in the spring of 1960 a team of PAVN military cadres was dispatched from Hanoi to the mangrove swamp area near Ben Tre in the Mekong Delta. The team recruited locally, mobilized sympathetic villagers, and by early 1961 had fielded PLAF’s first two battalions, with the northern cadres becoming the battalions’ officer corps. In 1963, the history continues, those units were enlarged into Regiments 1 and 2. A third regiment was formed the following year, and in September 1965 the three, now joined as the PLAF 9th Division, engaged the Americans in Operation Junction City. During the same period, the Hanoi official history continues, the PLAF 7th Division was formed out of two PAVN regiments—the 141st and the 165th, both formed and brought south from the famed PAVN 312th Division, which had fought between An Loc and Loc Ninh. Today these two divisions are described as having fought the war as a corps—the Cuu Long Army Corps—in the pre-1968 period. Actually PAVN in those years never fought as a corps, nor even as a division, and, in fact, only infrequently by battalion. The Hanoi account misstates the nature of the communist military forces in the South, making them out more or less orthodox. It also greatly glosses over the contributions of the southerners to the PLAF. It avoids both the PLAF and PAVN designations and lumps everything

under the term *revolutionary army*. The official dogma today is that the armed forces of North and South were always a single entity. Thus historical fiction has been brought full circle: where once it claimed there were two armies (the PLAF involved and the PAVN not involved), now it claims there was only one army; and, by ignoring the southern contribution, it implies that PAVN won the war. The fact is that at least until 1968 the burden of combat was carried by the PLAF. It comprised chiefly southern recruits, reinforced by “filler packets” of what were called “re-groupees,” that is, southerners who went North in 1954 in Operation Exodus and who then were infiltrated back into the home areas in the South. There were northern soldiers and officers in the PLAF in the early years—and its top leadership under Gen. Nguyen Chi Thanh certainly was northern—but their numbers were small, and they were chiefly technicians and other skilled personnel not available in the South. In keeping with the principle that guerrilla war must be self-contained and self-supporting, the PAVN High Command deliberately sought to limit assistance to the PLAF to that which was essential: strategists and tacticians, guerrilla-war handbooks, and logistic necessities not found locally.

The institution for northern personnel and logistic support of the PLAF was created at the 15th Plenum in May 1959. A command and control mechanism, as part of the DRV's National Assembly Reunification Committee, was also established at the same time; later it became the famed Central Office in South Vietnam (COSVN). Internally this command unit was known as Line 559. Under it three “59 groups” (named after the date of the plenum) were assigned logistic duties by land, sea, and into Laos. The most important was Group 559 (formed May 1959), which operated the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the South. Group 579 (formed July 1959) under Rear Adm. Tran Van Giang, later to become the Maritime Transport Command, was assigned to do at sea along the Vietnam coast what Group 559 was doing in the mountains of Laos. Then came Group 959, a command and supply system for the Pathet Lao in northern Laos. This was Line 559:

Line 559 became the basic, primary rear support service [with] the task of providing the highest possible level of transportation

for the material, technical and manpower services being sent to the South from the North and from friendly countries . . . [and] to transport delegations of Party and Government cadres going to the front, and delegations of our friends going to the battlefield. Line 559 established the staging area for Main Force units to use as jumping points in attack or going to the various fronts. It reached a level of activity unprecedented in the history of war in our country.¹⁶

The famed Ho Chi Minh Trail (formerly the Truong Son Route) operation, conducted by Group 559—a network of roads, trails, streams, and rivers running down the spine of the Annamite mountain chain of eastern Laos through some of the most inhospitable terrain and impenetrable jungle in the world—was an impressive example of human endurance, doggedness, and organization.¹⁷ Initially the Ho Chi Minh Trail consisted of about 100 way stations a day's march apart. Eventually they were consolidated to 12, each with extensive facilities. Group 559 grew accordingly, from the initial few hundred to 50,000 in the Truong Son command, plus another 50,000 PAVN engineering troops, plus 12,000 PAVN infantry and antiaircraft artillerymen defending the Trail. In all, perhaps a million people traveled down the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the war, a third of them to their deaths.¹⁸

The existence of Group 559 and deep PAVN involvement in the war were reported early in the war by Hanoi watchers and some journalists but denied by Hanoi, and thus the assertion was widely disbelieved. Only now do Hanoi historians corroborate the fact that there was deep PAVN command and control in the South from the earliest days, as well as systematic logistic support during the war.

Today Hanoi historians not only acknowledge, they boast that the communist military force in the South was always regarded by the Hanoi High Command as a single military entity with but one purpose: to advance the cause of uniting all Vietnam under Hanoi's banner. While the High Command always sought to make the military apparatus in the South as self-contained as possible so as not to be a drain on Hanoi's meager resources, it also kept the southern structure under tight leash, using northern cadre structure and logistic support as the means. Necessity dictated that northern involvement deliberately be kept obscure, but PAVN

presence was extensive. Such is what PAVN generals now write in their memoirs. Some clearly oversimplify the case. Indeed the exaggeration some PAVN historians now indulge in virtually denies that the NLF and PLAF made any important contribution and gives *all* credit for victory from the beginning to PAVN. Such an interpretation is as far from the truth as was the original insistence that there was no PAVN involvement whatsoever.

There were two communist-led armed forces in the Vietnam War—PAVN and PLAF—if for no other reason than because of a sense of separate identity among their rank and file. Whatever monolithism may have existed at the generals' level, the perception by those who fought was of a sharp difference, especially in purpose. On both sides there was acknowledgment of spiritual unity, if not oneness, and, of course, mutual interacting support in logistics and in battle. But the two forces were seen as separate entities and different in terms of organization, source of support, and, above all, objective. PAVN's objective was unification, the PLAF's was a monopoly of political power in the South—parallel objectives, obviously not identical, and potentially divisive. The best evidence of this separateness is found in the angry and sometimes credulous testimony of postwar NLF and PLAF defectors who fled abroad and now write of the betrayal of the PLAF and the NLF by PAVN generals.

Based on early experience, the PLAF in 1960 was organized on two levels: Full Military (or Main Force units) and the Paramilitary (or guerrilla force, which was of two types: the Regional, or Territorial, Guerrillas and the Local Guerrillas), a force that built to an eventual size of some 400,000 at its peak in early 1968.

Initially the burden of combat fell almost entirely on the PLAF. Gradually the force balance tilted away from it because of attrition and because the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) enlarged and was joined by the arriving American and other outside forces.¹⁹ To maintain a balance of forces in the South, Hanoi was obliged to send increased numbers of PAVN regulars southward. These began as PAVN "filler packets" in PLAF units. Then came small PAVN units and finally entire PAVN divisions. Eventually almost all PAVN infantry divisions were outside of North Vietnam—in Laos, in Cambodia, or, overwhelmingly, in South Vietnam.

Shifting the burden of war in the late 1960s from PLAF to PAVN was simply a matter of necessity for Hanoi. The PLAF was decimated by the 1967–68 Winter-Spring Campaign (and the 1968 Tet Offensive), and although it recovered somewhat in numbers, it never regained its original prowess. Increasingly after 1968 the burden of warfare was shifted to PAVN units. By the Easter Offensive of 1972, PAVN accounted for about 90 percent of the day-to-day combat. For practical purposes the PLAF had been destroyed.

In terms of heritage the Viet Minh and Vietnam wars left on PAVN a lasting residual effect that can only be called romantic. The dominant collective memory appears to be that those war years were times of gallantry and heroism, when every event was larger than life, in sad contrast to the present. Astoundingly, against overwhelming odds, the wars were won, even when many in PAVN in their hearts secretly felt that total victory was impossible and that the realistic outcome would be not defeat but something far short of victory. Yet it is also a bittersweet memory, for the price paid in lives and suffering was enormous, even ghastly. That, too, adds poignancy and contributes to the lingering bouquet. “All we revolutionaries,” Premier Pham Van Dong said to an interviewer, “are incurable romantics.”

China's Influence

Vietnamese communist military thinking, organization, and strategy have been heavily influenced by the Chinese, although historians outside of Vietnam do not agree on the exact nature of that influence. French writers and others who wrote early—Bernard Fall, P. J. Honey, George Tanham, Dennis Duncanson, and John MacDougall—tend to place more emphasis on initial Chinese influence, while later writers place somewhat less. Some of these same writers also note fundamental differences in terms of martial influence, for instance, the fact that in Vietnam, after the throne, it was the army not the mandarinat (as in China) that was the principal state institution, an important difference in terms of heritage.²⁰ Whatever the exact nature of the debt it never in the past was enthusiastically acknowledged by Hanoi and today is virtually denied.

The Chinese hand does seem omnipresent in early PAVN

history. The original Party-led armed force, the Viet Minh army, was created and fielded from China by the Chinese Nationalists. Later it was nurtured and funded largely by the Chinese Communists. Military manuals, such as they were; formal military education in the classroom; field training; all was by Chinese, first Nationalist then Communist. In the first two decades of PAVN's existence nearly all of its imported logistic assistance came from China—either directly or, if from the USSR, through China and with Chinese cooperation. During the Vietnam War, Chinese anti-aircraft troops and Chinese railway and warehousing personnel served in Vietnam. The Party's lack of effusiveness in expressing gratitude to China was in part because it wished to stress the theme of self-sufficiency and self-reliance, in part because it was sometimes tactically unsound to call attention to such support, in part because of the problem of equity in the Sino-Soviet dispute, and in part because of ingrained antipathy for things Chinese.

Initially, after World War II, public appreciation was expressed even to the Chinese Nationalists and even by General Giap himself:

In regard to China, when her troops occupied Northern Vietnam down to the 16th parallel [1945] the Chinese troops proved to be of worthy assistance and always respected our Government [DRV]. Indeed President Chiang [Kai-shek] has many times declared himself a sympathizer with the liberation movement of Vietnam. Sino-Vietnamese ties based from time immemorial on similar geographic, economic and cultural factors indeed became even faster. Today our Government and people sincerely thank President Chiang, the leader of 450 million Chinese people together with General Lu Han and all top ranking officers and officials of the Chinese occupation force.²¹

The French, perhaps for tactical reasons, overstressed the Chinese connection during the Viet Minh War. Lucien Bodard writes:

Giap's regular army as it had been known hitherto had been good but still not far removed from a guerrilla force. The Chinese needed only a few months to turn it into a People's Army on the Mao Tse-tung model. The work was carried out in a mixed zone on either side of the [Chinese] frontier. First came the underpinnings, the substructure. . . . Then the flesh and blood

material. This was trained in China, in huge camps at Nanning, Trungkhanhphu, Montseu and elsewhere. . . . Indoctrinated Viet Minh learned how to handle modern weapons and they were taught Chinese tactics. As Giap's army learned trade under its Chinese advisors, so from China it received weapons and ammunition. . . . Chinese supplied the Viets with as much as they could take, saturation being the only limit. . . .²²

Obligation of this magnitude has never been acknowledged by PAVN, if indeed it should. Mostly, appreciation was expressed in abstract terms; as in these words by General Giap:

The Party has correctly and ably applied the military line of Marxist-Leninist theory and Mao Tse Tung's thought to the concrete conditions of Vietnam in scoring outstanding successes in the movement for national liberation. . . .²³

Even this tempered expression is no longer fashionable in Hanoi. Where once the Hanoi press was enthusiastic in its tribute to China and the aid provided—the “lip and teeth” relationship—there now is studious avoidance. Official histories earlier were full of detailed accounts of assistance; current editions give only bare acknowledgment. Where once there had been little but Chinese influence, today there appears to be none at all.

Some Vietnamese argue that the strategic doctrine PAVN employed during the Viet Minh and Vietnam wars was authentically indigenous Vietnamese. They point to the respective histories of the two countries as evidence: China, long an ordered society of rice farmers; Vietnam, for centuries a society doing battle with invaders who forced them to become talented in guerilla warfare. Thus there was little the Vietnamese could learn from their Chinese mentors. Some few even assert that it was early Vietnamese in China—such as Giap and Ho—who taught the tenets of revolutionary guerrilla war to Mao Tse-tung, not the other way around.

Sino-Vietnamese relations during the Vietnam War were complex, far more so than Soviet-Vietnamese relations. China wanted the Vietnamese communists to win but also to follow cautious policies that would not endanger China or threaten to provoke a U.S.-China confrontation. It stood ready to provide Hanoi with all *necessary* military aid, but often there was disagreement,

traceable to differing military doctrines, over what constituted necessary. Not wanting to get trapped in the war, China preached the sermon of self-reliance. Mao Tse-tung always seemed ruled by a sense of his own limits of power both with respect to managing the DRV and controlling the course of the war, even as he wanted the war to prove the superiority of his thought. The most important touchstone for all Chinese attitudes was the Sino-Soviet dispute. When forced to choose between serving the war or serving its interests in the dispute, invariably it chose the latter.

The overview of Chinese attitude set forth here would not be entirely accepted by Vietnamese leaders. Rather, looking back, they probably would make these points about Chinese wartime behavior: that the fundamental Chinese orientation throughout was a mix of ideological commitment and pursuit of selfish national interest, with the latter always dominating the former; that despite great assistance provided by the PRC, support was always conditional and never certain; that at critical moments, such as the advent of American air strikes into North Vietnam, the Chinese stood by and did nothing; and finally that the Chinese never did care deeply about the Vietnamese and their cause—what sentiment they did hold derived from the wrong motive: manifestation of anti-Russian feelings.

The Sino-Soviet dispute was the cutting edge of Vietnamese-Chinese relations throughout the war years. The essential Hanoi attitude toward China (and the USSR) in this respect was that neither the PRC nor USSR supported its effort fully and that such support as was offered was given for the wrong reasons. Hanoi was able, to a remarkable degree, to put the Sino-Soviet dispute to its own use during the war years. Because of the dispute it even was able to maintain advantage during major downturns in relations with China, downturns that were distinct and not infrequent.

Beyond the somewhat amorphous differences inherent in the Sino-Soviet dispute, we can refine other points of contradiction in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship that largely explain the post-war breach. Hanoi wanted, and China did not, a communist world united front on Vietnam. This did not necessarily require an end to the Sino-Soviet dispute, but it did mean the USSR and the PRC would have to agree on a single course of action and a sys-

tem of unified logistic support. Such a proposal was made by Premier Kosygin in a visit to Hanoi in February 1965. It was rejected outright a few weeks later by Mao Tse-tung. Years later DRV cadres were still angry and bitter over the Chinese refusal.

The DRV leadership wanted and felt it had the right to total PRC commitment, which it never got. It never got troops or the volume of aid it believed it needed. PRC support was always reserved and consistently used as a bargaining device in the bigger game, the Sino-Soviet dispute. During the Cultural Revolution, when aid from China fluctuated because of internal turmoil, DRV leaders became furious over what they considered Mao's mad irresponsibility.

A third point of contention was that Hanoi was willing to take high risks to win the war, including those which could endanger China, such as, I believe, soliciting Chinese troops for combat. I have never been able to find evidence for the frequently encountered assertion that the DRV did not want PLA troops to come into Vietnam because once in they might refuse to leave. On the contrary, a case can be built that especially during the early (1965–66) period the DRV schemed to entrap the PLA in the war but that the Chinese understood the ploy and refused. Mao made it clear in mid-1965 that his troops would not be coming. After the start of the Cultural Revolution the matter became academic as far as the Vietnamese were concerned. In retrospect it is clear—although it was not at all clear at the time—that the PRC saw Vietnam as a trap and had no intention of repeating its Korean War mistake. China was therefore extraordinarily careful to keep its skirts clean as far as involvement-confrontation with the United States was concerned. Even so, the “red horde” intervention myth that the DRV hoped to turn into reality persists even to this day.

The Paris talks, eventually although not initially, were another Sino-Vietnamese point of contention. Hanoi did not want, ever under any circumstances, a negotiated settlement that merely meant peace (unless the alternative was annihilation), although political settlement (or “fight-talk”) was a legitimate form of political struggle strategy. The Vietnamese communists' memory of betrayal by comrades at the conference table in 1954 remained undimmed, and the Politburo was determined never again to run

that risk. Initially China shared this view and opposed negotiations, but gradually its attitude changed, and by the early 1970s it more or less tacitly favored a settlement of the war short of Hanoi's goal of unification.

Finally there were strongly held differences over strategy and military doctrine. Those are discussed in Section IV.

Probably it is safe to conclude that Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Communists never did truly want decisive Hanoi victory, for that would mean eventually some 50 million Indochinese with a long history of antipathy for China bound together under Hanoi leadership. The Chinese would have preferred to deal with four separate Indochinese states, including two Vietnams, the southern one preferably left-leaning neutralist but in any case independent of the North. Beijing, however, was never willing or able to take measures to prevent a decisive Hanoi victory. Instead it relied on the United States to serve that interest.²⁴ In light of all this it was probable, even inevitable, that Sino-Vietnamese relations would enter the postwar world in a condition of advanced deterioration and would eventually descend into war.

PAVN vs. America

This is not a book about the Vietnam War. However, it seems appropriate to include a commentary on the kind of unconventional warfare PAVN directed against South Vietnam and America.²⁵

The most important thing about the Vietnam War today is to understand it because it represents not dead history but a condition that has come to be the dominant motif of the twentieth century, as was Marxism in the nineteenth century and Jeffersonian democracy in the eighteenth. One judgmental conclusion then is that America did not at the time and does not today understand the essence of the Vietnam War. In this ignorance lie both past tragedy and future danger.

We should be chary of generalizations about unconventional warfare. In many ways the Vietnam War was singular, one of a kind, meaning it has only limited universal applicability. A great deal has been written in recent years about applying the "lessons learned" in Vietnam to Africa, Central America, or even to Afghanistan. Unconventional wars grow because of the peculiar lo-

cal political soil of individual cultures. They are causal reactions to perceived opportunities in political-power struggles or social weaknesses in particular societies. They are not interchangeable—there is no such thing as a universal handbook for conventional war, appropriate for all times and all places.

What does exist in this kind of warfare is what might be called the Law of Essence. The Chinese “people’s war” essence was strategy: rooting the struggle in the people and trading land for time (the long march); it developed at least in part because of the perception that the Chinese Nationalists operated on the basis of a nonstrategy. The essence of the Viet Minh War against the French was *spirit*, the spirit of anticolonialism, nationalism, xenophobia. It developed in the face of a kind of nonspirit on the part of the French. The essence of PAVN’s success in South Vietnam was *organization*, again, in the face of a sort of nonorganization on the part of the South Vietnamese government and society. The Law of Essence therefore is this: The offensive, or insurgent, force instinctively will seek to find the enemy’s chief weakness and structure its campaign around that weakness. In anticipating the direction of unconventional warfare, use the rule: Study the incumbent’s condition to find his chief weakness, then assume that it will be the focus of insurgent strategy.

Some other aphorisms are suggested by an examination of PAVN’s war in South Vietnam:

1. God helps those who help themselves. He will help *only* those who help themselves. He *cannot* help those who do not help themselves. Outsiders can contribute, but they cannot win an unconventional war by themselves. The greatest temptation here is to succumb to the syndrome, “Step aside, son, and let the big boys do this.”
2. In approaching an unconventional warfare situation, we (the United States) should never treat our prestige casually. The value of our nation’s word is what allows us to influence events without turning each event into a test of strength.
3. We must maintain perspective and remember that our failure in one endeavor does not invalidate all others.

Finally, probably the most significant conclusion about PAVN-style warfare has to do with the idea of protracted conflict, or the fifty-year-war thesis. It seems evident that victory in limited

warfare, even if it is naked aggression, is possible if the war is dragged out and made to seem endless. The unfortunate meaning of this seems to be that no democracy can win a protracted conflict. The dangerous future scenario is clear: a minority, even a tiny minority, in a society becomes determined to have its way through protracted conflict; it demonstrates its implacable determination and establishes its credibility that it intends to fight a fifty-year war. This is no easy task, but, once accomplished, the incumbent society eventually will capitulate, concluding the candle is not worth the game. The great attraction for PAVN's style of warfare is this: there is no *proven* counterstrategy.

Notes—Chapter 2

1. Bernard Fall, *Le Viet Minh, The Viet Minh Regime* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations), 1956. As Fall points out, for a Vietnamese revolutionary movement to have been successful in the 1930s it would have been necessary, theoretically, at least, to overcome the opposition of only 42,000 French in Indochina (the commercial, official, and military population), more than half of whom were wives and children. By the end of the decade the opposition consisted of 10,779 regular troops, 16,218 men of the indigenous militia, and 507 French police agents.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Bernard Fall's *Le Viet Minh, The Viet Minh Regime*, and *Street Without Joy* are standard works, as are Donald Lancaster's *Emancipation of French Indochina* and Phillipe Deviller's *Histoire du Vietnam, 1940–1952*. Lucien Bodard's *Quicksand War* is particularly recommended. George Tanham's *Communist Revolutionary Warfare: The Viet Minh in Indochina* is good on doctrine, and Edgar O'Ballance's *The Indochinese War, 1945–54* is an expert's view of the technology of guerrilla warfare and the counter-insurgency involved.

4. Hanoi historians have tended to concentrate on particular aspects of the Viet Minh War, particularly the battle of Dien Bien Phu and have not produced a full-scale official history of the war of which I am aware. The most valuable writings, perhaps, are those of the principals: Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, Ho Chi Minh, Le Duan, and Truong Chinh. A useful work is *Pages of History: 1945–54*, in the *Vietnamese Studies* series, no. 7, which contains eight essays on the Viet Minh War, as well as a twenty-page chronology.

5. Communist victory in China in late 1949 changed the Indochinese situation profoundly, making Viet Minh victory possible, if not probable. By 1954 aid had reached the level of 4,000 tons per month; Chinese military personnel, as advisors and technicians, numbered about 8,000. Much less aid came from the USSR, partly because of transportation difficulties.

6. Mainly in the North. In the southern part of the country, Viet Minh Zones 5 and 6 were less strategically important than Tonkin. Eighty percent of the Viet Minh forces were north of Vinh. The South was regarded mostly as a source of manpower and supply rather than as a theater of operations.

7. The Viet Minh thrust toward Laos triggered a French blocking operation, using the base built at Dien Bien Phu, which became a gauntlet thrown down by the French and picked up by the Viet Minh. Dien Bien Phu, a classic thirteenth-century siege battle, was won stunningly and surprisingly by the Viet Minh largely because their forces were able to

haul artillery pieces through the mountains, an action judged impossible by French intelligence. The base surrendered 8 May 1954, marking the end of the Viet Minh War. Hostilities officially terminated ten weeks later.

8. Total casualties in the French Expeditionary Corps during the eight years of fighting were approximately 140,000 men; casualties in the Indochinese Force fighting the French were 31,000. The cost to the French was estimated at \$11 billion. Viet Minh casualties were estimated by Bernard Fall to total around 500,000, or about three times those of the French Union forces.

9. *Historic Documents of the Lao Dong Party*, pp. 21–22.

10. Fifteenth Plenum Resolution.

11. See the author's *History of Vietnamese Communism* (Menlo Park: Hoover Institution Press, 1978) discussion of the "golden cause of unification," p. 115.

12. See the author's *Viet Cong*.

13. *Vietnam, the Anti-U.S. Resistance War for National Salvation 1954–75: Military Events*, PAVN Publishing House, p. 18.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 30–31.

17. For extended discussion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, see the author's "Road to Victory: The Ho Chi Minh Trail," *War in Peace*, vol. 5, no. 60.

18. An approximate figure, as are most statistics on PAVN in this book. Throughout the Vietnam War, the "number-crunching game" about the size of the enemy, was played by the South Vietnamese and viciously among the U.S. military and civilian intelligence agencies (principally the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency). Densely packed briefing charts were produced, statistics were bandied about, categories and "definitions" of the enemy were debated—never to a final resolve. The fact was that most statistical assertions about the war and the number of enemy, dead or alive, produced by the intelligence community were mere educated guesses, and exactly correct only by sheerest accident. There were three reasons for this. (1) The required data base was never available; although the intelligence community pretended otherwise, we had neither accurate statistics nor adequate sources (most data came from interrogation of rank-and-file enemy prisoners who didn't have accurate statistics either). (2) We were trying to count the number of enemy military, but we could never agree on what constituted military enemy and what constituted non military enemy (by the enemy's own definition there was no such

thing as “non military”). The central characteristic of the Vietnam War was that no one on either side was ever certain who was on which side; to this day we are sorting out the truths of individual loyalties. (3) Neither the DIA nor the CIA ever measured PAVN using PAVN’s own organization chart, as should have been done; instead they invented their own nomenclature and categories, such as “home guard” and “infrastructure,” terms unknown in PAVN. In any event the Vietnam War simply was not given to quantification except in the crudest way—although throughout the war intelligence analysts played the omnipotent role by claiming to be able to statistically describe commitment, computerize the fruits of psychological mobilization, or put a measurement number on motivation. Smart “consumers” of the intelligence community’s products in Saigon simply ignored the quantification efforts.

19. Allied forces besides the United States were Thailand, South Korea, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand.

20. The best work available on Sino-Vietnamese relations in this period, including much detail about early PAVN, is King C. Chen’s *Vietnam and China 1938–1954*, (Princeton Univ. Press, 1969).

21. Giap, *One Year of Revolutionary Achievement* (1946). Hemen Ray in *China’s Vietnam War* (Radiant Pub. India, 1983) describes an exchange between Giap and Liu Shao-chi during a 1951 anniversary ceremony in which Giap said he preferred the Chinese military system over the Soviet military system. Ray’s quote here is attributed to *Da Gongbao*, 24 Dec. 1951.

22. Bodard, *The Quicksand War*.

23. Giap, *Ten Years of PAVN*.

24. Mao told a West German ambassador (who told the author) that the Americans “obviously were never serious about Vietnam since they left after suffering *only* 46,000 casualties.” Since magnitude is perceived differently in Asia, this probably was a reasonable interpretation.

25. For a brief official history of Hanoi historians’ interpretation of U.S. strategy in the Vietnam War, see PAVN’s 40th Anniversary, Vietnam News Agency, 19 Dec. 1984. (*FBIS Asia and Pacific Daily Report*, 21 Dec. 1984.)

CHAPTER 3

Postwar PAVN

The history of PAVN in postwar Vietnam is a history of dashed hopes and spoiled expectations. Ho Chi Minh had promised his soldiers a postwar Vietnam that would be a hundred times more beautiful than the one they knew, and such was their anticipation. It was acknowledged that for the conquered southerners there would be a period of painful readjustment, but even they would soon enjoy the benefits brought by prolonged peace.

PAVN generals in the first days after victory, in April 1975, indicated they expected a radical new direction and future for the armed forces—significant demobilization and conversion of PAVN units into instruments for economic development. Most seemed to welcome plans to beat swords into plowshares.

It was not to be. Within weeks PAVN was fighting a festering border war with its one-time fraternal ally, Pol Pot of Kampuchea, a confrontation that culminated at Christmas 1978 in full-scale invasion of Kampuchea, on the heels of which came a retaliatory invasion by China. PAVN found itself fighting a two-front war and being inadvertently thrown into deep dependency on the USSR. All of this was the more traumatic since none of it had been anticipated.

PAVN was in serious trouble late in the war, because after nearly a decade of fighting, it was bloodied and battered, its ranks decimated, its system weakened by prolonged strain. It needed, required even, a respite, time to recuperate. That was the reason its generals supported what for so long they had opposed, a negotiated truce arrangement with the enemy. There was fear that the Paris Agreements could result in a war that gradually faded into permanent stalemate—as had the “armistice” in Korea—and that unification would be denied. Perhaps unification could be

pursued by other means. In any event the long years of war had taken such a toll that a time of surcease was mandatory.

The problems faced by PAVN in the 1974 period amounted to a kind of systems breakdown, caused by a worn-out logistics machine and nearly universal war weariness. The situation was candidly acknowledged at the time. One of the most comprehensive discussions came from PAVN's chief Political Commissar, Maj. Gen. Le Quang Dao, in outlining PAVN's seven chief difficulties. He did not suggest that they were insurmountable, but neither did he suggest that there were sure ways of overcoming them:

1. The problem stemming from the dual-control system in PAVN: the military command structure vs. the Party leadership within the armed forces, the military commander vs. the political commissar.
2. The problem of *esprit de corps* among rank-and-file PAVN, a general malaise termed "post-war mentality."
3. The problem of PAVN officers with inadequate military knowledge and insufficient military technological skills for the kind of war that had emerged in the 1970s.
4. The problem of policy conflict within PAVN [and involving the Party] over the conduct of large-scale combined or joint military operations and in kinds of military training developed.
5. The problem of lack of standardization of equipment, logistic shortages and administrative breakdown within PAVN.
6. The problem of the incompetency of many low level PAVN officers and, as a consequence, general inefficiency and lack of performance by basic military units.
7. The problem of anachronistic Party structure within PAVN in the form of outmoded organizational structure and inappropriate or out-of-touch political commissars.¹

The short-run response to these problems was, in effect, to militarize the entire government at the ministerial level. The effort was called Program 198 (after Council of Ministers Directive 198, which launched the program in January 1974). Its purpose was to meet critical logistic needs so as to permit at least a continued holding operation in the South. Under the new program all relevant ministries and departments—for instance those concerned with transportation, manufacturing, and food produc-

tion—had installed at the ministerial level what was called a Military Management Committee, composed of PAVN, Party, and Ministry officials. The committee's orders were to do whatever was necessary within each ministry or agency to meet war needs. Beneath this committee was a series of descending subcommittees charged with the same mission.

Apparently the program did succeed in eliminating some of the more serious logistical problems, but it was apparently done at the price of considerable damage to military-civilian relations. The strain suddenly was eliminated, however, for suddenly the war was over.

Virtually the entire North Vietnamese army—certainly all of the PAVN's infantry divisions—were in the South at the end of the war. PAVN's immediate task, for which it was neither prepared nor trained, was military government,² and it became the Party's instrument in restructuring the entire social system of the South, what came to be called "breaking the machine."³ Individual soldiers were told they were the midwives at the birth of a new society, a metaphor traceable to Lenin's instructions to the Red Army after the Bolshevik Revolution.⁴ The two major programs, the Re-Education Camp program and the New Economic Zone program, were administered largely by PAVN forces, although much of the actual work was assigned to PLAF troops under PAVN command since PAVN for the most part was a stranger in a strange land.⁵

In July of 1975 the Politburo sent down the first of a string of directives reorganizing PAVN—a process that has continued—required by the changing internal and external conditions, as well as by new needs, some of which were brought on by the process of perpetual reorganization. The first round of changes was designed to restructure PAVN so that it could more effectively meet security needs and perform mass motivation (indocination) tasks in the South. Specifically it involved tracking down enemy soldiers who were still in hiding, repressing counter revolutionaries, defending fixed installations, and maintaining public order and security.⁶ Such were special PAVN tasks in the South. Nationwide its tasks were listed as maintaining public order and security, engaging in productive labor, stabilizing the Party's political base, ensuring popular support for the armed forces,

building up the reserve forces, and maintaining a defense readiness.

In the summer of 1976 the 350,000-man PLAF was formally abolished, and most of its Full Military units—such as they were for they had never recovered from the devastation of the 1968 Tet Offensive—were absorbed into PAVN. New paramilitary elements were created to parallel the structure in the North. An additional military element, called the Armed Youth Assault Force (AYAF), was developed.

The second round of changes was designed to build up PAVN's size and strength. It began late in the summer of 1976, about a year after the end of the war. The number of PAVN infantry divisions was increased from twenty-seven to fifty-one (thirty-eight regular infantry divisions and thirteen smaller economic construction divisions), the number of military corps from six to eight. The Vietnamese air force was raised from three to five air divisions, including one helicopter division. The Vietnamese navy, in three years beginning in 1978, doubled the number of its combat vessels. The PAVN High Command reconstituted the dormant 405th Airborne Brigade, indicating renewed interest in that kind of war making. It also began experimenting with the "combined arms" concept although that format has not been employed in Kampuchea.

In the months following the war the High Command discovered that resistance to duty in the South, where there was a softer quality of life, compared to the harsher North, was undermining troop sense of discipline. Young soldiers from the "convent society" were finding the South a highly seductive place, thereby decreasing unit effectiveness. A major emulation campaign was launched to strengthen what was called "PAVN troop observance of socialist laws and regulations," meaning strict enforcement of PAVN regulations, and to increase the individual soldier's sense of "socialist patriotism." Retraining was aimed at reducing slackness, self-indulgence, and corruption, which it was said increased sharply after the end of the war, and increasing the spirit of dedication among those shipped off to the Cambodian front.

At the same time, a major doctrinal dispute broke out at the Politburo level concerning the future of PAVN. Fragmentary evidence suggests it was a spirited political fight while it lasted,

about a year. The specific issue turned on the question of whether there should be PAVN demobilization and, if so, how much. The factional struggle pitted General Giap and other PAVN High Command generals against a faction led by Truong Chinh. It was a political struggle between the “metal eaters” and the “economists” over allocation of labor to the task of economic reconstruction.

The Truong Chinh faction proposed that PAVN's security duties in the South (the High Command's excuse for a continued large military force there) be turned over to the newly formed paramilitary Armed Youth Assault Force, that there be wholesale demobilization of PAVN, and that PAVN units be transferred—intact as units—to the civilian labor market. The Giap faction argued for retaining at least 75 percent of PAVN forces in the South (that was mid-1975) with no major demobilization. The economist faction then offered a compromise: major demobilization in exchange for heavy allocation of funds into the technological buildup of PAVN, so as to create a smaller but more modernized force. This was countered by the general's compromise offer that PAVN not be demobilized but that a large proportion of it be assigned to the economic sector. A “security faction” led by Tran Quoc Hoan held the balance of power in that particular factional battle. Its chief interest was maintenance of a sizable security force in the South. It threatened to side with the generals, then pressed a compromise: some demobilization, economic duties for PAVN troops, allocation of more funds for the modernization of PAVN, and continued military draft. The bargain struck was largely a victory for the generals. In typical Hanoi political fashion its formal announcement came as a statement that the full military draft was to be reinstituted and that PAVN was now to assume a major role in nation building: “The Party Central Committee has decided to implement the military draft for all male youths along with the system of the army participating in economic construction.”⁷

A month later, in October, the Defend Vietnam from American Imperialism Enlistment Campaign was launched, a new nationwide military conscription program. In December draft quotas were announced for all districts of the country, including the South. Of the estimated 650,000 males who would reach age

eighteen in the following year, 200,000 would be called up in the first tranche.⁸ All males aged eighteen to twenty-five were required to register, and it was announced in the North that all would be expected to serve eventually.⁹ In the South, youths were classified as either “revolutionary” background or “puppet family” background, and, while both groups were told they could expect to serve, the kind of service would depend on their classification. In both the North and the South, draftees were told that they were being drafted for twenty-four months although five years later most were still in service.¹⁰ Within a year PAVN was conscripting at the rate of about 300,000 per year—in some instances (to meet district quotas) ages sixteen to fifty-five, although only those in the eighteen-to-thirty-five-age bracket were sent into combat in Kampuchea.

Behind the demobilization debate lay a more fundamental and far-reaching issue, which is probably why Le Duan and others kept out of the factional fight. It had to do with the kind of armed forces Vietnam would require now that it was united and at peace. Many factors impinged on Politburo members’ personal egos as well as their thinking: ideological, strategic, and institutional. There were varying assessments concerning potential resistance in the South, how best to deal with Pol Pot, and the possibility of China as an adversary. There was general agreement that Vietnam should remain (or become) a major regional force and that meant a sizable armed force, but beyond that there was little consensus. As usual, factionalism was at work, and the generals were attempting to protect their military empire. It was in that context that the Hanoi leaders attempted to think through the kind of armed force Vietnam should have in the future.

The pivotal figure in the debate, although his influence had begun to wane, was General Giap. In the two years following the end of the Vietnam War he made a series of speeches setting forth his ideas on PAVN’s future.¹¹ The central tenets he advanced were that Vietnam must become a major industrial and military power, that there could be no significant demobilization, that PAVN must reach new heights of military preparedness, that there was a military industry to be created to produce modern weapons, and that the military had to assume certain economic tasks as part of the drive to make Vietnam strong. In October

1975, citing a Politburo directive, Giap reduced these tenets to three major tasks for PAVN:

1. Stand ready to fight and defend the Fatherland against violators of our independence and sovereignty. . . . 2. Smash all daring and confusing schemes of the counter-revolutionaries, and firmly maintain political security and social order. . . . 3. Engage in productive labor and in national economic construction work.¹²

Giap's speeches tacitly acknowledged that in the vastly changed postwar situation PAVN must be transformed from an army of revolutionary soldiers fighting with guerrilla tactics into an orthodox armed force that could defend existing institutions and fixed installations from internal and external threat. It was a new and broader task, he said, and quoted Ho Chi Minh's observation made at the end of the Viet Minh War: "Before we had only the night and the jungle. Now we have the sky and the water." Then Giap added, "Now that the Fatherland is unified, all territory, airspace, territorial waters, the vast continental shelf, all are ours. Our coast is long and beautiful. We must know how to defend it. . . . We must build a strong and stable national defense system to preserve our independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity."¹³

The longer-range shape of PAVN was outlined in 1978 by Maj. Gen. Cao Van Khanh, PAVN's recruiting and training chief, when he described plans for a five-year development program designed to increase specialized understaffed elements such as fighter pilots, navy personnel, radar operators, and coast-defense personnel.

Thus the prospect two years after the end of the Vietnam War was that Vietnam would embark on economic development that involved a great deal of modernization of its armed forces, somewhat suggestive of the modernization program being planned at the time in China. But by January 1978 the range of choices open to the PAVN generals as to what sort of armed forces they might create, and in what manner, began to narrow. Relations with China were deteriorating at a rather precipitous rate, and for the first time the idea of war with China was no longer unthinkable. PAVN forces were beefed up on the China border. By

July 1978 PAVN's mission was being adjusted. "Defend the Fatherland Is the Most Important Task of PAVN" ran a headline over an editorial in the PAVN Party newspaper on 9 July 1978. The reference was clearly to China.

At the same time, the low-grade border war with Kampuchea that had begun at the end of the Vietnam War was growing more serious. Fighting along the Tay Ninh province border with Kampuchea was a daily affair by mid-1977, culminating on 31 December when Hanoi broke off diplomatic relations. By October 1978 PAVN was once again on a war footing. For the soldiers it had been a short peace, about three years. A "social mobilization" campaign began at that time, and by February 1979 the press of Hanoi was asserting that "Vietnam's primary task at the present time is mobilization."¹⁴ On 3 March 1979 the entire society was put back into wartime harness with a general Mobilization Order. It set "three great tasks" for the society: "1. build national defense; 2. increase production, and 3. develop the socialist managerial system." The emphasis was on the youth of the nation, for whom there were five separate "great tasks . . . annihilate the enemy, develop the para-military system, do productive labor, insure internal security, and perform necessary ideological tasks." The order required all able-bodied persons to work ten hours a day, eight hours in productive labor and two hours in military training. It required universal participation in civil-defense exercises. And it unleashed a massive emulation and motivation campaign employing the most purple language. Said a Hanoi poster of the Chinese: "The horrible animal ferocity of these feudal pillagers and invaders, driven by lust and barbaric ambition . . ."¹⁵

Challenge and Response

PAVN in the post-Vietnam War years was challenged three times—in Kampuchea, on the China border, and within Vietnam by internal resistance. We can discuss these three challenges only tentatively because the PAVN response in all three cases is still being tested.

Vietnamese-Cambodian relations, that is, relations between PAVN and the Khmer Rouge (wartime Cambodian communist military force), were never close or harmonious and, at times,

even as early as 1979, were barely workable—although that fact was not widely known abroad. The breach was made more likely from the start by ancient deep-seated ethnic antipathies on both sides.¹⁶

The end of the Vietnam War was marked by great anarchy and confusion throughout Indochina in the midst of which both PAVN and Pol Pot's forces engaged in island grabbing and other territorial seizures involving insignificant real estate. That behavior set the initial tone for postwar Kampuchean-Vietnamese relations, which soon devolved into continuous border incidents. The Hanoi leadership tried various means of addressing the "Pol Pot problem," as it was expressed. At first these were political or quasi-political; later they became military (see discussion in Chapter 5 on strategy employed against Kampuchea). The early Hanoi hold on the Khmer Rouge had been rooted in the Cambodian communists' dependency on its communist allies in Vietnam. The mechanism for controlling them was the so-called "Hanoi Five Thousand," a faction within the Khmer Rouge, many of whose members had lived and been trained in North Vietnam and presumably had an allegiance to Vietnamese communism. The Politburo's calculation was that it could control the Khmer Communist Party, and the Kampuchean society, by manipulation of that faction. Its hopes were dashed when Pol Pot butchered most of the five thousand. Other means were tried. Le Duan was dispatched to Phnom Penh soon after the end of the war to attempt, with appeal to fraternal brotherhood and veiled threat, to bring Pol Pot in line, but his efforts failed. Then came a series of punitive military assaults, mostly into the Parrot's Beak section of Kampuchea, in the hope they would trigger a *coup d'état* in Phnom Penh. Some of the strikes were highly ambitious, involving as many as 90,000 PAVN troops, but they failed to unseat Pol Pot. Also, according to Pol Pot, the Vietnamese tried to bribe his bodyguards to assassinate him. Nothing seemed to work, and increasingly the Politburo began thinking in terms of a full military solution. First came experimentation with a Khmer liberation war, then full-scale invasion.

The move to save the Kampucheans from a Pol Pot bloodbath was not for humanitarian reasons as Hanoi claimed later. Actually, by the time the Vietnamese struck, most of the killing

was over. What goaded the Vietnamese into such decisive action was the growing effect of Pol Pot's perverse determination to "reverse history" by institutionalizing hatred for Vietnam in the Kampuchean society. Other Pol Pot behavior, even the most bloody, could be endured but not the prospect of his raising a generation of Khmer indoctrinated to utterly despise the Vietnamese.

PAVN struck on Christmas Day 1978, employing a highly visible Soviet-type attack: tank-led infantry plunged suddenly across the border, drove to the Thai frontier, then fanned out, and within days had occupied Kampuchea.¹⁷ Pol Pot and his followers of the Democratic Republic of Kampuchea fled to the Cardamom mountains between Battambang and the sea to continue the war. Resistance to PAVN was soon joined by what was called the third force, including troops under Son Sann, a Paris businessman, and Norodom Sihanouk, former Cambodian ruler.¹⁸ The Chinese began underwriting the logistic needs of those willing to fight the Vietnamese. In the meantime, Heng Samrin and some 300 Khmer cadres became the new government in Phnom Penh and began the formation of an army that it was hoped would eventually take over from the occupying PAVN.

When the rains stopped in the summer of 1979, PAVN forces launched a major pacification drive, using some 170,000 troops. The drive proved to be inconclusive and was the first full indication to the Hanoi High Command that it was involved in a protracted conflict. As the realization sank in, PAVN settled down to the slow task of pacifying Kampuchea. In 1980 a PAVN campaign, employing a force of about 90,000, launched a dry-season assault against resistance forces. It proved once more what PAVN commanders knew only too well—that it is nearly impossible to force guerrillas to stand and fight when they do not want to. Gradually the PAVN force in Kampuchea was restructured so that about one-third of the 180,000-man force was engaged in guerrilla bashing and the other two-thirds was assigned to work in the villages in pacification activities.

The essential cause of the bog-down—which the PAVN High Command, of all military hierarchies, should have anticipated—was the effective guerrilla war mounted by Pol Pot. Military journals in Hanoi reported that the Khmer Rouge would take ad-

vantage of inclement weather, infiltrate western Kampuchea, lay mines along trails, stage raids into populated areas, then retreat into Thai sanctuary.

Officially PAVN troops in Kampuchea are volunteers:

In the past four years Vietnamese volunteer troops have carried out their international duty of helping the Kampuchean people defend their independence and freedom, safeguard their security and restore their normal lives. Vietnamese blood and bones have contributed to the existence of exceptional solidarity between the two fraternal peoples.¹⁹

The number of PAVN troops involved:²⁰

January 1979	200,000–220,000
January 1981	200,000
January 1982	180,000
July 1984	160,000
April 1985	150,000

Officially, also, the Kampuchean War is now treated as an integral part of the Third Indochina War, that is, against China, and has been retroactively dated to 1975 by Gen. Van Tien Dung:

Then [in 1975] when the Vietnamese people enthusiastically set about healing the wounds of war, restoring and developing the economy, and building socialism, China's reactionary ruling group began open pursuit of hostility towards Vietnam. Employing the Pol Pot–Ieng Sary clique, it unleashed war on our country's southwestern borders and then launched a brazen, aggressive war on Vietnam's northern borders. . . .

For the third time, then, Vietnamese armies are in Kampuchea and Laos. . . . As long as Beijing, in complicity with imperialist and other reactionary forces, threatens the independence and sovereignty of our three countries, continued presence of the Vietnamese Army in the two fraternal countries will be necessary. . . .²¹

Employing the theme that the "Kampuchean situation is irreversible," the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) in 1982 began publicly to portray the war as a thing of the past. Official statements used past-tense verbs. General Dung noted in his Fifth Party Congress report, for instance, that "three of the past five years were spent in wars of national defense . . . but now we have peace." This usage was picked up by the Hanoi press, and

there followed frequent reference to “the military victories achieved in our two wars for national defense,” the two being the war against China and what was delicately phrased as “the war in the Southwest.” (This portrayal is reminiscent of the advice the late Senator Aiken of Vermont gave to Lyndon Johnson in the midst of the Vietnam War: that the United States should simply declare itself the winner and go home.)

The Party line, asserted in 1982, was that the Vietnam-Kampuchean “militant solidarity has entered a new stage of development.” The SRV, it held, would continue to support and assist Kampuchea, in keeping with the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation and in the spirit of proletarian internationalism; but the tasks in Kampuchea, of “reviving the nation, and struggling to defend its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity,” belong to the Phnom Penh government. In this the SRV did not even acknowledge a responsibility for the internal security of Kampuchea. In short, Hanoi sought to “Khmerize” its war.

The PAVN High Command, tacitly acknowledging it was stuck in Kampuchea, sought continually to reduce the strain. The original 200,000 troops were reduced to perhaps 130,000 by mid-1983, a redeployment that provided a more tenable PAVN stance. There were fewer military sweeps into guerrilla lairs and greater use of artillery, more static guard duty and less road patrolling. Military forces concentrated on keeping open the lines of communication, guarding the towns, and building up the fledgling army of Heng Samrin’s People’s Republic of Kampuchea.

PAVN service in Kampuchea is acknowledged to be difficult, more so even than war in South Vietnam. The Hanoi press candidly describes the conditions faced:

Living conditions are austere and hard . . . daily life is full of hardships. There are nutritional deficiencies, a shortage of vegetables . . . there is malaria and the constant search for medical plants to treat it . . . many flies and mosquitoes . . . many misunderstandings between the friendly people and our troops.²²

Thai officials report a steady flow of PAVN deserters crossing the border into Thailand, where they are interned. More than 100 PAVN officers defected in 1981 alone; the PAVN desertion rate into Thailand in 1982 averaged about 75 a month.²³

PAVN’s efforts to build the PRKAF began with a cadre corps

of 200, which by 1983 was listed at a strength of 20,000, although with a desertion rate that sometimes reaches 50 percent a year it would seem difficult even to know how many troops were available for duty each month. The PRKAF is being created in the image of PAVN, with two types of regular forces and two types of paramilitary forces. Concentration is on the paramilitary forces, which oddly enough are called guerrilla forces, even though supposedly the PRK is the incumbent government of the country.²⁴

"Welcome home" celebrations staged for PAVN troops returning from Kampuchea in 1983 were widely publicized and created an impression that the war there was ending, as far as the Vietnamese were concerned. Within Vietnam, since information is so closely controlled, it probably became a credible claim. Families with sons still in Kampuchea might know otherwise, but not the general population.

In retrospect the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea appears to have been a disastrous mistake. Apparently it was a decision hastily taken in the belief that a quick successful takeover would force the Chinese to accept the new condition. Apparently, also, it was based on the estimate that Pol Pot had neither political depth nor military staying power and that a traumatic assault would shatter his capability to resist and cause the Khmer people to rally to the new government. The enterprise was misbegotten from the start. Assumptions proved wrong and strategy didn't work. The invasion did not solve the Pol Pot problem but bogged Vietnam down in a costly war, tarnishing its image abroad by tarring it with the aggressor brush. It totally ruined relations with China, which might otherwise have been salvaged. It drained the economy at home and unleashed a host of other problems there.

Kampuchea, for PAVN and Hanoi, remains at this writing an unsolved problem. Two obvious major tasks face the Vietnamese: to end the resistance by the guerrilla forces and to make the People's Republic of Kampuchea a viable government, not just in Phnom Penh, but at the provincial, district, and village level throughout the country. PAVN has a major role to play in the task of pacification—it must bash the guerrillas. Its contribution in the second task is army building, to create out of nothing an effective indigenous army, the People's Republic of Kampuchea Armed Forces. PAVN duty in Kampuchea by the mid-

1980s was being presented to the rank and file by the agit-prop cadres as “the performance of international duty.” PAVN, it was argued, has “a glorious international mission especially with regard to the two fraternal nations, Laos and Kampuchea.”²⁵ PAVN duty in Kampuchea is not merely to fight:

Units now fulfilling international duties in Kampuchea must help our friends build a governmental administration, build a new way of life, and build revolutionary forces with profound revolutionary feelings and an ardent sense of international proletarian solidarity.²⁶

Although it seemed by 1985 that PAVN in the near future would not destroy the coherence of the insurgent movement, no serious observer believed that in the same period the insurgents could prevail or even force some major change of war policy. If there was such a change—for instance, partial Vietnamese disengagement or negotiations to establish some new coalition government arrangement—it would be because of developments in Hanoi, not because of guerrilla activity in Kampuchea.

In Laos PAVN faces the same sort of problem as in Kampuchea, but not nearly as serious a one. It has an estimated 30,000 PAVN troops stationed there, a larger force than the Lao army, and is engaged in pacification efforts and the buildup of the Lao armed forces. Not much is known about its activity, but even the Hanoi press indicates that resistance by anticommunist Lao and ethnic minorities in Laos at times becomes significant. One report in mid-1983, for instance, said that the PAVN B-24 Infantry Group in “discharging its internationalist obligation in Laos . . . annihilated 650 of the enemy, captured 1,157 prisoners, recovered 654 rifles and brought 11,500 of our Lao friends to security. . . .”²⁷

The second postwar challenge for PAVN—China—resulted to a degree from Vietnamese actions in Kampuchea. The invasion of Kampuchea was for China the final intolerable act by Vietnam, already guilty of continuous unconscionable behavior: intimacy with the USSR, brutality toward ethnic Chinese in Vietnam, entertaining “imperial dreams” in Southeast Asia, and generally provocative and insulting treatment of China.

China’s first reaction to PAVN’s invasion of Kampuchea was

sharp brinkmanship, that is, saber rattling, stern warnings, and military buildup on the Sino-Vietnamese border. Vietnam replied in kind. For a month the situation grew steadily more tense, then turned ominous and finally exploded in a Vietnam-China border war that lasted seventeen days.

The Chinese attack came at dawn on the morning of 17 February 1979 and employed infantry, armor, and artillery, but no air power (which did not appear at any time during the war). Within a day the PLA had advanced some five miles into Vietnam along a broad front. Then the advance slowed and nearly stalled, apparently because of heavy Vietnamese resistance and because serious difficulties had surfaced in the Chinese supply system. On 21 February the advance resumed against Cao Bang in the far north, on the all-important city of Lang Son, and toward lesser targets of Dong Dang and Soc Giang. Cao Bang was entered 27 February and was under complete Chinese control by 2 March. Lang Son and Lao Cai were captured two days later. By 5 March the Chinese, apparently deciding Vietnam had been sufficiently chastised, announced that the incursion was over, that PLA forces were withdrawing. The withdrawal, however, was slow, and it was Carthaginian, with the departing Chinese army destroying as it went. Withdrawal was completed on 16 March.²⁸

The invasion caught the PAVN High Command off guard. Apparently neither it nor the Politburo ever really believed relations with China would come to this. The result was some initial panic in Hanoi. Parents were told to evacuate their children to the countryside, a crash program to build air-raid shelters was begun, the diplomatic community in Hanoi was instructed to make evacuation plans, police were armed, and ethnic Chinese were relocated. A week later most of the orders were cancelled.

In the years following the 1979 incursion, warfare of sorts continued between the two countries, something more than cold war, but not a full-scale continual border war. Rather it was a sporadic campaign of harassment by each side, chiefly by artillery fire and mortars and with patrols across the border. On the Chinese part the activity was closely coordinated with events in Kampuchea: PAVN action along the Thai border against the Khmer resistance force, particularly if it involved a PAVN incursion into Thailand, almost automatically meant that Chinese

guns would open up along the Sino-Vietnamese border, usually batteries opposite the Vietnamese provinces of Ha Tuyen and Lang Son. In late August 1984, for instance, Hanoi said that in the previous six weeks Chinese artillery fire had averaged about 2,000 rounds a day and on some days had been as high as 10,000 rounds; it also claimed that in the previous five months it had inflicted 7,500 casualties ("enemy put out of action") on China.²⁹ Such a level of military action places the condition beyond mere cold war.

The Chinese also continued to man their frontier heavily—in early 1985 there were nine Chinese armies in the border region, including one with amphibious capability at the coast. In 1982 the Chinese began strengthening their military installations on Hainan Island, across from Vietnam, adding a new air base with additional anti-aircraft missile batteries and increasing their landing-craft fleet, clearly suggesting that any future attack could involve amphibious landings.

After the 1979 incursion, the Vietnamese stationed three regular divisions and several paramilitary units between the border and Hanoi, another five divisions to guard Hanoi, and one near Haiphong—a total of about 150,000 troops assigned to defend Vietnam against China. By 1983 the figure had doubled, mostly through the use of a new form of paramilitary force (see Chapter 2), and by 1985 some military analysts believed that the total PAVN force ranged against China was about 600,000. PAVN troops at the frontier are better equipped now than in 1979—more tanks, mobile artillery, and some tactical air power in the form of Hind-24 helicopters.

The Sino-Vietnamese border war, in truth, was not a war so much as it was a further effort by the two to delineate their new relationship. That interpretation may strike the Western reader as a peculiar exercise in metaphysics, but it is the genuine act of redefinition that goes on continually in Asia, with high stakes and profound meaning for the future. Gone is the centuries-old tutor-pupil relationship, to be replaced eventually by some yet-undetermined arrangement. For the Vietnamese the touchstone in this process is "independence" from China and the Asian-style egalitarianism which that connotes. For the Chinese the touchstone, as always, will be the Sino-Soviet dispute and the effort to

reduce USSR influence in Hanoi. Thus each side is attitude, not issue, oriented. For the Vietnamese there must be abandonment of the ancient notion of the rimland barbarian's obligation of deference to the Central Kingdom. What is involved for the Chinese is the USSR's "neocolonialism" in Vietnam, seen mainly as a problem requiring an attitudinal change by Hanoi's leaders, if not now, in the next generation.

The indirect effect of the bog-down in Kampuchea and the China attack was to throw the PAVN logistic system into heavy dependency on the USSR. There are no arms factories in Vietnam, so all military hardware must be imported, and about 99 percent of it now comes from the USSR. Vietnam is dependent also on the USSR for some 10 to 15 percent of the rice it consumes and for other vital commodities such as oil, spare parts for its transportation system, and chemical fertilizer.

The Moscow view of the Kampuchean operation is not clear, although externally Moscow was fully supportive. The PAVN strategy in Kampuchea was one of which Soviet military advisers could approve; some reports say Soviet advisors assisted in drawing up invasion plans. Moscow's treatment of the Chinese attack was more guarded. Throughout the seventeen days of the invasion the USSR took only minimal action and carefully labeled each act to avoid ambiguity. Moscow did nothing that could be interpreted as being militarily hostile toward China. Its pronouncements on the incursion, especially in the first days, were so generalized as to be meaningless, and deliberately so. At no time during the seventeen days did the USSR make any move in the direction of China. A Moscow call-up of reserve forces for training was clearly labeled an annual affair of no greater magnitude than in years past, which was true. There was no beef-up of the Sino-Soviet border region, already the most heavily defended front (in terms of firepower) the world has ever known. In short, the Soviet Union judiciously did nothing in military terms. It did immediately generate a crash program of military assistance to Vietnam. A special airlift flew in needed light cargo—such as medicines—and some heavy cargo in small amounts, chiefly for show. The war was over before new supplies could make any significant contribution, but they did demonstrate Soviet support.

Moscow's fundamental calculation apparently was twofold: first,

that China would not make all-out war against Vietnam, but rather would mount an incursion that would be shallow and brief; second, that given this delimited threat, Vietnam was capable of handling it. Thus Soviet officials reasoned that quite soon the situation would solve itself, as far as the USSR was concerned. Both calculation and conclusion proved correct. (The USSR and SRV in the 1980s moved closer to a systematic military alliance. The strategic meaning of that, with further detail, is found in Section IV.)

The China threat subsided somewhat following the incursion, but never again could the Hanoi High Command be certain that the Chinese would not invade Vietnam. On balance, from Hanoi's perception the Chinese invasion was a Chinese setback, if not a defeat, militarily, but in psychological terms it was a success. China's credibility was such that the High Command was forced to assume that if the Chinese came again they would not halt in the foothills but drive all the way to Hanoi.

The third challenge faced by PAVN in the postwar years has been internal resistance in the South, and, to some extent recently, in the North.

The resistance in the South in the early postwar years was ubiquitous, generally passive, and ineffectual. Its activities ranged from token gestures such as graffiti to occasional heavy guerrilla attacks. During those years, the organized insurgent bands had opportune moments—in 1979, for instance, when PAVN was fighting a two-front war in Kampuchea and against China—but consistently were unable to act in a decisive or even comprehensive manner. The size of the insurgent force in 1977 was reliably fixed at about 15,000. The 1983 estimate, somewhat less authoritative, was about 25,000-plus camp followers. Insurgents can be clustered into the following groups, listed in descending order of significance:

1. The Montagnards, or Highlanders, of the central southern Highlands, concentrated in the triangle formed by Ban Me Thuot, Dalat, and Pleiku. They have offered the toughest and most consistent resistance to the new regime, although their actions have been highly defensive. These insurgents are organized by tribe, loosely joined together in the organization known as FULRO.³⁰ They are supported from

Kampuchea by the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) and, through the CGDK, by the Chinese. Clandestine CGDK radio stations in Kampuchea broadcast regular reports on victories scored by FULRO-Dega (tribal name), undoubtedly inflated accounts but with a basis in fact.

2. The Hoa Hao sect, a militant socioreligious group whose resistance elements operate chiefly out of the Seven Mountains area in Chau Doc province, and to less extent in Kien Giang, An Giang, and Kien Phong provinces. The Hoa Hao proved indigestible for the Diem government in the 1950s and continues the tradition with the communist government today.
3. Remnants of the two major Vietnamese nationalist organizations that date back to the 1930s: the Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD) and the Dai Viets. Their members are scattered throughout Vietnam, but most are found in the cities and in the Hue region. Apparently associated with this group, which travels under the designation of the National Salvation Movement (see below), are elements of the Cao Dai, another militant religious sect headquartered in Tay Ninh province. However, it is probable the Cao Dai operates its own separate insurgent force.
4. ARVN holdouts and recently formed ex-ARVN resistance elements located mainly in the Nha Trang area and in Phuoc Tuy and Ving Long provinces, also reportedly in the Highlands along the Kampuchean border.
5. Catholics, who represent a significant passive-resistance force and are, for the most part, unarmed. However, they are important since they are socially well organized. The most significant concentration is in the Ho Nai region north of Ho Chi Minh City and the adjacent forested foothills where scattered bands of Catholic ARVN holdouts still operate. Catholic resistance also is found in Vinh Binh and Vinh Long provinces and around Hue.³¹
6. Externally based organizations that purport to control guerilla bands in Vietnam, supported by Vietnamese émigré and refugee groups in the United States, France, Britain, Australia, Thailand, Kampuchea, and China. Activity of those outside of Vietnam is beyond the scope of this book, although it should be noted that the PAVN High Command has taken cognizance of it and appears to be attempting to track the groups as closely as possible.³²

Military operations by PAVN forces against the resistance

usually consist of military sweeps or mop-up campaigns, often involving battalion-size units and sometimes employing helicopters to attack resistance centers in the remote areas. There have been some public executions of insurgents accompanied by extensive press coverage. Quartering of PAVN troops in private homes helps reduce chances of resistance attacks and also makes grenade throwing and bombings more unpopular with the general public.

PAVN's responsibility is limited to large-scale insurgent threat. Deployment of PAVN units indicates to some extent the geographical pattern of the guerrilla activity they must counter. The greatest concentration is against Montagnard insurgents in what the Hanoi press terms "the nameless front," meaning the highland spine up the center of Vietnam. About 60 percent of the PAVN forces in the South in the mid-1980s were in the Highlands or in bases adjacent to the Highlands; the remainder were around Ho Chi Minh City. However, as the war in Kampuchea becomes protracted and manpower increasingly is shifted to the China border region, many of the fourteen divisions assigned to the South are under strength, some by as much as a regiment.

Resistance generally is poorly organized or not organized at all. What organization does exist is intentionally decentralized, patterned after the well-known Viet Cong "horizontal ladder system," a series of parallel self-contained elements that precludes extensive compromise if one member is captured. Found in the resistance are ex-ARVN officers and soldiers, former GVN civil servants and local village officials, and members of major social and political movements such as the Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, VNQDD, and Dai Viets. Proclaimed leaders often are said to be ex-ARVN generals such as Ngo Quang Truong, Bui The Lan, and Nguyen Cao Ky, who actually live in the United States or elsewhere abroad. Local figures known as resistance leaders are former Ninh Thuan province chief Tran Van Tu, ex-Ranger Capt. Tran Huu Thanh in Binh Thuan, and ex-ARVN Capt. Truong Dzenh Quay in the Ninh Thuan region. Allegedly the entire resistance movement is led by some ex-ARVN general operating under the alias of General Ba, who makes regular broadcasts from a clandestine station in the Mekong Delta.

Many of the individual insurgent forces use *phuc quoc* in their names. This term, meaning "national salvation" or "national res-

toration," is a great golden expression with extreme emotive value. It dates from turn-of-the-century opposition to the French, when it conveyed the sense of the restoration in Vietnam of the sort of existence that French colonialism destroyed. In the early 1980s the name Phuc Quoc People's Forces was seen scrawled on walls in Ho Chi Minh City, and the Phuc Quoc Army appeared in the same way in Hue. Other resistance groups, with even more exotic names, reported by people leaving Vietnam, include the Black Sail Group (Catholic, Ho Nai region), the Black Dragon (ex-ARVN 7th Division Catholic soldiers in the My Tho vicinity), the Yellow Crab Force (Cao Dai in Tay Ninh province), the White Tigers (Hoa Hao in An Giang province), the Laotian National Cobra Force (apparently a mixture of Vietnamese and Lao operating along the Laos-Vietnam border), the Cambodian Border Force (a similar group along the Kampuchea-Vietnam border), and the Overseas Free Vietnam Association (an émigré group that supposedly aids the resistance movement, headquartered in either Paris or London).

The most common types of resistance are armed attacks on reeducation camps, remote military installations, and city offices. Incidents reported have included a rocket attack on a Phan Rang reeducation camp and one on a Xuan Loc camp during which 6,000 persons escaped; dynamiting a water-pumping station in Ho Chi Minh City; also in the City, bombs near the Continental Hotel and a grenade thrown into the yard of the former U.S. ambassador's residence, which was used as living quarters for several high-ranking PAVN generals; roads mined; and railroad switching equipment booby-trapped. Large battles, sometimes involving as many as 1,000 resistance fighters, are reported frequently in the Highlands, but the figures probably are exaggerated. Even so, the Highlands region obviously is a matter of major concern to the PAVN High Command.

There apparently is considerable recruiting, organizing, and training of resistance units, equipping them with stolen weapons and supporting them with money obtained through counterfeiting and bank robbery. Soliciting of food, money, aid, information, and cooperation from urban and village dissidents reportedly is common.

A kind of psychological warfare is conducted by resistance

elements and sometimes by ordinary citizens. Clandestine broadcasting comes from the Mekong Delta region and the Highlands. Leaflets are scattered in the streets at night or left in schoolroom desks. Rumor—the famed Radio Catinet of earlier times—operates as ingeniously as ever. The most commonly used method is to write slogans and messages on sidewalks, walls, and even in railroad tunnels: Nothing Is More Precious Than Independence and Liberty—Ho Chi Minh (an ironic comment on how northerners force on southerners what is regarded as an alien way of life); Born in the North, Die in Cambodia. When a sacred banyan tree was poisoned in a rural Buddhist temple yard, word spread that it died because of God's displeasure with what was happening in the country. Disinformation campaigns are common and involve the use of false official documents, impersonation of security officers, resistance forces operating in religious garb, and counterfeiting currency to undermine the economy.

Much of the resistance is token low-level gestures by large numbers of people. At propaganda lectures villagers can be slyly satiric. The story is recounted of a cadre who told an audience that in North Vietnam there is a factory that can produce one truck per minute. The entire audience stood up and cheered, and continued to cheer for ten minutes. A French Catholic priest reported that at a denunciation-of-Americans meeting, one woman rose to say she hated the Americans very much “because they ran off and left us in the hands of the communists,” leaving the nonplussed cadre wondering whether or not that was a proper “positive thought.”

Thus, between guerrilla-war activity and passive sabotage of the social process there is in Vietnam today a vast gray area that can be encompassed by the term *resistance*. In dealing with this general problem in the South, and now in the North, the Politburo's central strategy never has been built around frontal military assault or simple “guerrilla bashing” as is the case in Kampuchea. The armed forces deal only with guerrilla attacks and other threats of major violent insurgent actions. During a period in the late 1970s, special PAVN security units—wearing distinctive light-colored uniforms to distinguish them from regular PAVN troops—were formed to do duty in this gray area, but those units were phased out in the early 1980s, and their duties were trans-

ferred to Ministry of Interior security elements. PAVN still supervises some security operations in cities and villages through its youthful paramilitary units, mainly manning roadblocks, checking identification cards and travel documents, and enforcing curfew hours and travel restrictions.

Beyond those limited contributions by PAVN, the antiresistance effort in Vietnam is vested in the internal security *apparat* and in special Party elements because the struggle is seen as essentially organizational. Communism came to power in Vietnam by means of the organizational weapon, and that weapon represents its greatest potential danger. What is called for, consequently, is a counterorganizational response, and that requires infiltrating or co-opting the resistance movement or turning one element within it against another. Motivational devices that harness public opinion against the movement must be employed, and in that sort of subtle warfare there is little place for the ordinary PAVN soldier.

The prognosis from the Politburo's viewpoint is clear: by a combination of methods, that is, using the military and social organizations, the government will divide and slowly destroy the resistance. For its part, the resistance rationale and general expectation, as outlined by various spokesmen in Vietnam and abroad, can be summarized as follows. After years of numbness, the resistance movement in Vietnam is now coalescing, becoming aroused. At the same time, the crumble has begun in the Vietnamese communist system. Soon it will be time to form a single resistance organization within Vietnam and a single émigré movement outside of Vietnam to support the cause. There is widespread latent support for this within Vietnam, awaiting organization. Externally the resistance has the support of almost all overseas Vietnamese, at least their moral support. The scenario will be: formation of a single Indochina united front movement, creation of a coalition government-in-exile, launching of a systematic counterorganizational campaign in the villages of Vietnam, undermining (and co-optation) of PAVN, and finally a general uprising accompanied by external support (presumably China). The communist system then disintegrates and a provisional government takes over in Hanoi and stages general elections to select the form and personnel for a new government (although only those who have fought on the ground in Vietnam

will be eligible to serve, that is, there will be no return of former governing figures).

The assumption here is that China would accept noncommunist governments for Indochina; some of the émigré politicians claim to have this assurance already. The prospects, of course, are entirely contingent on continued or growing discontent in Vietnam and on the ability of the resistance to out-organize the Party cadres in the villages.

It is exceedingly difficult to evaluate the degree of threat the resistance represents for Hanoi or to estimate its chances of success in toppling the present Hanoi government and rolling back communism in Indochina. It is even more difficult to estimate the residual effects of the resistance, assuming that its efforts continue without decisive outcome.

It is argued by some that the Party in Vietnam has too tight an organizational structure in place to be destroyed by the present level of opposition and is too clever in counterorganizational strategy ever to allow significant opposition to develop. Their conclusion is that only if there is massive outside support—China is the only realistic candidate here, and not an enthusiastic one at that—can the regime be brought down from the field. That may be too strong a judgment. In any event it seems clear that in the struggle between the resistance and the Party, victory in the end will go to the side that can develop the most organizational strength and that can most successfully disorganize its opponent.

Finally there is the question of whether what is past is prologue. The Marxian effort to communize the world, if such is the correct expression, has been a fifty-year one-way street. To date at least, the process by which a country becomes communist has been irreversible. Thus, history stands as ominous augur for the Vietnam resistance movement. Further, history demonstrates that maintenance of internal order never has been a serious problem for any modern totalitarian system. All of these factors suggest that any assessment of the resistance must be pessimistic. Yet Vietnam's history is so packed with the unexpected, so marked by events and outcomes no one anticipated, that only a foolish prophet would dismiss the resistance out of hand or flatly predict it will never succeed.

Notes—Chapter 3

1. Maj. Gen. Le Quang Dao, "Problems Related to Army Development," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, May 1974, pp. 31–48. See also "Streamlining the Military Staffs in Ministries and Sectors," *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 4 Jan. 1974.
2. PAVN as an army of occupation was given the task of "mass motivation," which involved not only indoctrination of southerners but rounding up ARVN holdouts, repressing counterrevolution, and maintaining public security.
3. PAVN's nearly exclusive responsibility for implementing Party policy in the South ran from May 1975 to early 1976. PAVN Military Management Committees, consisting of joint civil (ex-NLF and PRG) and military (PAVN) bodies replaced the Republic of Vietnam governmental structure at all levels. The most important of these, the Saigon-Gia Dinh Military Management Committee, was composed of four PAVN generals and seven Party civilians; its chairman was Col. Gen. Tran Van Tra. After the North-South Reunification Conference in Nov. 1975, the Military Management Committees were gradually replaced by Party-dominated people's revolutionary committees, and PAVN's direct administrative role diminished.
4. Radio Hanoi, 4 Oct. 1975.
5. For accounts of the difficulties of PAVN soldiers in the first years after the war, see the author's year-end accounts in the 1975 and 1976 editions of the Hoover Institution's *Yearbook on International Communist Affairs*.
6. The basic directives that set the postwar tasks for PAVN were issued by the Party Central Committee in mid-1975. They are the Central Committee Directive 210, 14 Aug. 1975, and the Central Military Party Committee Resolution 88, 27 July 1975.
7. *Nhan Dan*, 22 Sept. 1977.
8. *Nhan Dan*, 22 Dec. 1977.
9. *Ibid.*
10. According to refugees interviewed by the author in the Thai camps.
11. The first of these was an address regarding PAVN's postwar role, carried by Vietnam News Agency 19 Apr. 1976. His most important statements were two addresses in October to a PAVN economic cadre conference, carried by *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 22–24 Oct. 1976; and to a conference of military and civilian scientific-technical cadres, carried by *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, no. 11, Nov. 1976. Also, there was a PAVN anniversary address in Dec. 1976, carried by Radio Hanoi, 23 Dec. 1976, and an article titled "From Invincible Strength in the War of Resistance

to Miraculous Strength in Socialist Construction,” *Tap Chi Cong San*, Jan. 1977. Taken together these represent a comprehensive statement of Giap’s view of the proper postwar role for PAVN.

12. Radio Hanoi, 22 Oct. 1975.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Nhan Dan*, 3 Feb. 1979.

15. *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Sept. 1979. This social mobilization campaign within PAVN was extended with the adoption in early 1983 of a three-year plan (1983–85), once again to overhaul PAVN. This time the objectives were to insinuate the Party *apparatus* more directly into day-to-day activities, to improve efficiency and cost-efficiency, and to improve the “spiritual” life of the soldiers. See *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 29 May 1983.

16. For a description of Khmer-Vietnamese antagonism, see the author’s monograph, *Cambodia War*, 1970.

17. Foreign diplomats stationed in Hanoi at the time of the Kampuchean invasion said that initially they encountered genuine optimism among Vietnamese officials and firm belief that the entire operation would take less than six months. By the end of the year, the diplomats said, the same officials acknowledged privately that their optimism had been unjustified.

18. Formally known as the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK).

19. An editorial, “Our Just Cause and Good Will Attitude,” in *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 1 Mar. 1983.

20. PAVN initially invaded Kampuchea (on Christmas Day 1978) with about 150,000 troops. The occupation force rose to 224,000 during 1979, then began to drop, as noted. Basic PAVN deployment consisted of six divisions (the 4th, 57th, 72d, 75th, 339th, and 431st), two marine units (the 950th Brigade and the 126th Corps), and a headquarters unit (called the 479th Front HQ). With the exception of the headquarters unit at Siem Reap and the 339th Division guarding Phnom Penh, all of the units were deployed no farther than fifty kilometers from the Thai border and the Gulf of Siam. Most of the strength was concentrated in the northwestern part of Kampuchea, with marine units stationed in the south chiefly to protect Kompong Som and the southern waterways.

21. Van Tien Dung, Fifth Party Congress Report.

22. *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 22 Apr. 1981.

23. Thai authorities report that a steady, but not heavy, flow of PAVN deserters began almost immediately after the invasion of Kampuchea. The Chinese during the same period were reporting that PAVN soldiers were defecting across the China border at the rate of about sev-

enty-five per month (for 1982). In 1981 a total of six PAVN pilots (five fixed-wing planes and one helicopter) flew to China and asked for asylum, a seventh pilot was caught attempting to defect and was executed. *Le Point* (Paris), 7 Dec. 1981.

24. See Nhu Phong, "Svay Rieng Province (Kampuchea) Successfully Builds Local Forces," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Oct. 1982.

25. An editorial, "Teach International Brotherhood," *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 4 Jan. 1984.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Radio Hanoi, 23 Mar. 1983.

28. The Chinese had some 500,000 ground troops in the border region (Van Tien Dung claims 600,000). About 10,000 divisions actually crossed into Vietnam, including one held in reserve that saw no combat. PLA casualties later were reliably fixed at 20,000 KIA and 40,000 WIA.

29. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 23 Aug. 1984.

30. *Front Unifié de Libération des Races Opprimés*, founded 1964.

31. The most serious Catholic-based act of resistance in the past war years was the shoot-out at St. Vincent's (Vinh Son) Catholic Church on Tran Quoc Toan Street in Ho Chi Minh City in mid-February 1976. In an all-night siege one PAVN soldier and two rebels (one a woman) were killed. Five rebels were captured; later nine more persons were arrested. According to the government, a *Phuc Quoc* resistance group was using the church to print leaflets and to counterfeit currency. What was unusual about the case was the publicity the regime gave to it, even going so far as to send official television footage (including a scene in which a PAVN soldier fires a B-40 rocket into the church) to Western network representatives in Bangkok. On 13 Sept. 1976 the fourteen persons involved in the incident went on trial; all were found guilty. Three, including Fr. Nguyen Huu Nghi, were sentenced to death; eleven, including a second priest, received ten- to twenty-year prison sentences.

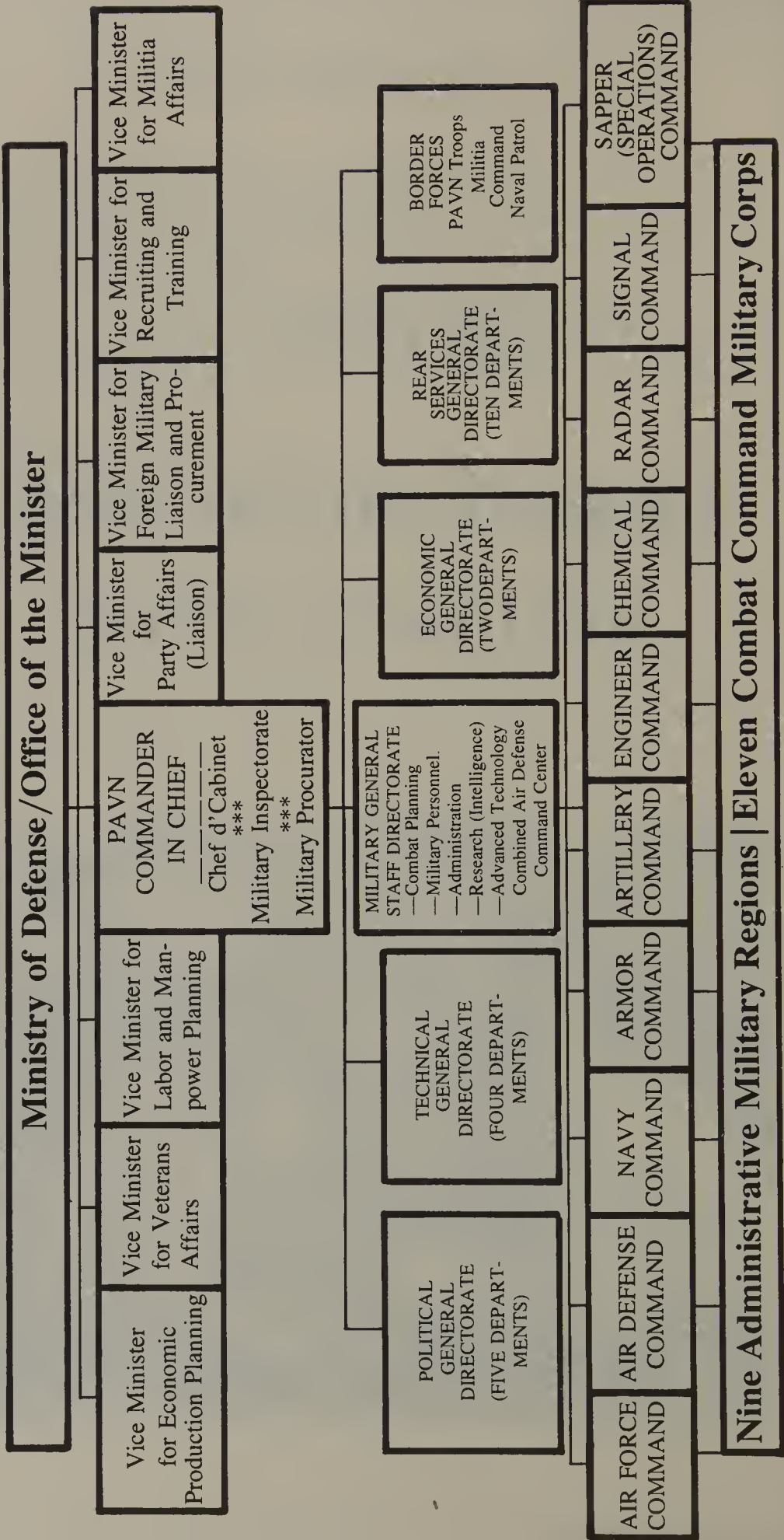
32. The three major resistance organizations in the United States are the National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam, the National Salvation Front, and the Overseas Volunteers.

SECTION II

Organization and Administration



Socialist Republic of Vietnam: Military Organization Chart



CHAPTER 4

The High Command Structure

The Vietnamese military establishment today is an enormously complex matrix of state and party elements, a vast welter of individual military units with a complicated liaison system linking them together. PAVN's upper level command structure is marked by greatly overlapping responsibility, dual functioning and the "wearing of many hats," that is, a single commander holding several posts simultaneously. Functional and geographic organizations are elaborate, inconsistent and constantly under reorganization. At all levels are familial and "old boy" networks, as well as other secret influences. Permeating all like a world within a world, is the Vietnamese Communist Party *apparat*, most of it overt but some of it clandestine. By administrative criteria employed in military establishments elsewhere, PAVN is vastly over-organized.

This section considers PAVN's organizational structure in terms of component, chain of command, function and administration.

Overview

Traditionally, the Vietnamese Communists have organized their fighting forces as a troika. Earliest references to PAVN speak of three types of troops. Such usage continues today.¹ The three are:

1. The Main Force, that is, the regular army, navy and air force, what elsewhere would be called the standing armed forces.
2. The Regional or Local Force, consisting of infantry companies with limited mobility and organized geographically, what elsewhere would be called a national guard or standing reserve.
3. The Militia/Self-Defense Force, a semi-mobilized element

organized along social structure lines (village, urban precinct) or economic enterprise (commune, factory, work site), which elsewhere would be termed a reserve force or simply a registered military manpower pool.

This division into three also was employed by the Republic of Vietnam Armed Force (RVNAF), as it was officially named, or Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), as it was commonly called. ARVN was "the army" to which the Regional Force and the Popular Force (Ruff-Puff in American slang reference) were added. The Regional Force was an outgrowth of the old Government of Vietnam (GVN) Civil Guard, a concept borrowed from the French. The Popular Force was an outgrowth of the traditional village defense force which predated both the Communists and the French. In both instances, North and South, the underlying concept of the "three elements of national defense" grew out of the three kinds of military force needed: a national army that could move anywhere, a geographically bounded local force with only limited transport capability but able to defend its own territory, and a purely static village security element.

Within these three "forces" in PAVN is a wide variety of "troops" which, in daily usage, is a far more important classification. The PAVN Main Force is composed of regular troops; PAVN Local Force of provincial, regional, territorial local and district local troops; PAVN Self-Defense Force is composed of militia troops, mobile militia troops, Assault Youth troops, Self-Defense troops and village troops.

In actual practice PAVN is casual and often inconsistent in structuring organizations and designating missions. Lines of responsibility, chains of command, organizational charts themselves tend to be far vaguer than in the U.S. Army. The author, during the Vietnam War, frequently would ask a PAVN defector or prisoner to draw an organizational chart of his unit and the chain of higher command. Usually the individual would produce a jumble of lines and boxes which even confused him as he attempted to explain them. Further, it is the nature of PAVN because of its history and the influences of Vietnamese traditionalism with its politics of clandestinism, to have employed over the years an almost endless variety of troop unit names, special des-

ignations, code designations. Many of these designations for security purposes are used only a few months. Some are highly descriptive although not informative, such as the *Red Arrow Into the Enemy Heart Unit*, some are so vague as to be meaningless to outsiders—for instance, *Cluster Two*.

For descriptive purposes it would seem best to simplify this organizational welter by reducing it to two functional elements: the regular military and the paramilitary, the first being what the Vietnamese call the Main Force, the latter being all else. This division into two elements appears to be employed by PAVN generals themselves in their strategic thinking. For instance, Hanoi theoretical journals discussing the strategy for dealing with what is termed a “national defense war,” meaning for invasion from the outside, commonly treat Vietnam’s armed forces as two elements: the regular force which would employ high technology big-unit tactics, that is, orthodox limited war defensive measures, and the rest of PAVN which would engage in what is termed “local people’s warfare,” that is, guerrilla war.

Examination of the organization of PAVN is divided here into five parts: the High Command, the command structure, the regular armed forces, the paramilitary forces and postwar reorganization.

First link in the PAVN chain of command, the “highest level,” is the party-state military policy-making apparatus. It consists of the SRV National Assembly, the Ministry of Defense and the National Defense Council (NDC) on the State side, and the Politburo, the Party Central Committee and the Central Military Party Committee (CMPC) on the Party side. This is not a formal entity, rather an association of individuals representing Party and State institutions who collectively and informally set overall military policy. Policy then is implemented by the PAVN High Command, again not a formal entity but an informal association of leaders, nearly all military. In actual practice this “highest level” High Command arrangement is not as complicated as it might appear since single individuals hold more than one position at the same time, some holding as many as six.² Thus, both policy determination and operational authority is vested in perhaps a dozen individuals who, among themselves, hold complete and unchallengeable control of the Vietnamese armed forces.

The PAVN Main Force, which over the years has variously been termed the Regular Force, the Full Military Force and the Permanent Force, consists (with current strength) of the following elements:

1. The People's Army, 980,000
2. The People's Navy, 12,500
3. The People's Air Force, 15,700
4. A back-up reserve of perhaps 2.5 million, sometimes termed the Strategic Rear Force, a semi-mobilized manpower pool to be tapped in time of emergency.

The second functional element of PAVN, here termed the Paramilitary Force, is composed of these elements:

1. The People's Regional Force (provincial level), 500,000.
2. The People's Self-Defense Force (urban) and People's Militia (rural, district level), 1.1 million.
3. The Armed Youth Assault Force (in the South), 1.5 million.
4. A back-up reserve force of perhaps 500,000 called the Tactical Rear Force, a semi-mobilized reserve composed mainly of veterans (many disabled) or overaged males; in time of emergency this force is to be called up to replace personnel in the People's Self-Defense Force and People's Militia who, in turn, will be transferred either to the People's Regional Force or the Main Force.³

An integral part of this entire structure is the Communist Party's various military institutions, discussed below.

The formal structure of PAVN within the Vietnamese society is set forth in the constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). The new Third Constitution, adopted by the National Assembly on 18 December 1980, contains more direct references to the country's armed forces than did the earlier versions, and for the first time devotes an entire section to national defense. The principle of universal compulsory military service is sharpened, the role of the National Defense Council (NDC) defined, and economic planners are specifically charged with creating a strong defense sector. All of this is new.

Previously the highest level of authority over the armed forces was clearly defined and centrally vested in the presidency: "The President of the DRV is the Supreme Commander of the Armed

Forces and is President of the National Defense Council.”⁴ His authority flowed from the National Assembly, or more precisely from the National Assembly Standing Committee since the Assembly itself met only a few days once or twice a year. The Standing Committee was in permanent session and was in effect a mini-assembly with most of the Assembly’s powers; it could, for instance, declare war or mobilize the country (Article 53). The Presidency and the Standing Committee combined to form the highest legal authority over the armed forces. Both were abolished with the adoption of the Third Constitution.

Under the new Constitution, the National Assembly’s legal authority with respect to PAVN is perhaps broader but less clearly defined: “The National Assembly has the duty and power . . . to decide on matters of war and peace.” (Third Constitution. Article 83.13). The National Defense Council is retained from the earlier constitution. The Council of State, newly formed under the Third Constitution, assumes the equivalent authority of the previous National Assembly Standing Committee in that it can declare war if the Assembly is not in session and mobilize the country. (Article 100.21/22). It also absorbs most of the functions of the Presidency. The chairman of the Council of State “commands the people’s armed forces . . . and is concurrently chairman of the National Defense Council.” (Article 103). The next step down, and the highest level of operational authority over PAVN, is the Council of Ministers, equivalent to a cabinet and responsible for “organizing national defense activities and building the people’s armed forces.” (Article 107.7) The chairman of the Council of Ministers currently is Premier Pham Van Dong.

The change from the Second to the Third Constitution, as far as PAVN is concerned, makes the highest legal level less personified and more collective or, to be more precise, it codifies the collective nature of the highest level of authority that has been the reality since the death of Ho Chi Minh. It also makes the highest level more amorphous. There no longer is a supreme commander, but a chairman of the Council of State who “commands the armed forces.” The National Defense Council further spreads authority for mobilization. Whether intentional or not, the PAVN generals under the new Constitution seem assured of a system of weakness in the legal organs superior to them since,

as is often the case with committee government elsewhere, when everyone is in charge no one is in command.

Under the new Constitution the role of the National Defense Council is officially defined. It is "to mobilize all forces and potentials of the country to defend the homeland." It thus is made explicitly responsible for what is the National Assembly's implicit duty, mobilization in the broadest sense. The National Assembly itself has no actual legislative power; it is a true rubber stamp, approving the laws and directives set before it by Party officials. Its central task, and an important one, is to guide, maintain and serve the country's mass organizations. Its stock in trade is motivation. In time of war—and Vietnam seems to be a state permanently at war—its duties include mobilization effected largely through the NDC. This is no small responsibility and the fact that motivational and mobilizational efforts in North Vietnam were so successful in past wars is a tribute chiefly to the National Assembly and the NDC.

The NDC was sharply reduced in size in mid-1981, following promulgation of the new Constitution. Membership was cut to five and currently consists of Chairman Truong Chinh, Vice Chairman Pham Van Dong and Members Gen. Van Tien Dung, Pham Hung and To Huu.⁵

Dating back to the founding of the DRV, the NDC has had a varied history. Initially, when the Provisional Viet Minh government was established in Hanoi in 1945 some of the cabinet posts, including the Ministry of Defense portfolio, went to non-communists.⁶ The NDC was conceived and introduced at that time as a mechanism with which the Party could control the armed forces when it did not control the Ministry of Defense. After the Party gained full control of the State in the late 1950s, the NDC's domain covered neither basic defense policy nor strategic planning, the first being reserved for the Party's CMPC, the second for the PAVN High Command. But it remained, or became even more important—it could hardly be otherwise considering its membership—as the highest level instrument for mobilizing human and other resources in the name of national defense. The NDC runs military enlistment drives and military emulation campaigns. It serves as spearhead for the neverending motivational and communicational efforts that go on in war and peace alike

to engender the support and allegiance of the general population for the armed forces.

The High Command

Actual authority within PAVN is held by less than a dozen individuals, most of them military, who hold two or three offices each in both Party (the Politburo) and State (Ministry of Defense) institutions, and who collectively and informally are called the High Command. (Biographies of these individuals can be found in the Appendix.)

The Ministry of Defense, organizationally, consists of the Office of the Minister of Defense and seven offices of Vice Ministers of Defense. The Vice Ministries are fairly small—although almost every Vice Minister also holds other important posts within the Defense establishment—and appear chiefly to be for coordination between the top echelon of the Ministry of Defense and other Ministries and State organs whose activities, chiefly economic, concern PAVN.

The highest level of authority for policy matters, including military policy, is found within the Party *apparat* (discussed below). The highest level of authority for military operations is the Military High Command. This is a somewhat loose term encompassing the Office of the Commander-in-Chief, five Military Directorates (in turn composed of twenty-two military departments) and the offices of seven deputy chiefs of staff.

By far the most important element of the Military High Command, under the Chief of Staff, is the Military General Staff Directorate (*Bo Tong Tham Muu*), which can be likened to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the U.S. Department of Defense. It is described as the “nerve center of the army, the most important military agency in the armed forces.”⁷

Of slightly lesser rank are four other Military General Directorates which can roughly be considered as “G-sections” or operational arms of the High Command. The four are:

1. The General Political Directorate (*Tong Cuc Chinh Tri*). This is PAVN’s oldest high level military institution, predating even the General Staff. It is the “keystone” of PAVN, obviously modeled after the Chinese PLA.⁸ It has great prestige and influence and is the mandatory corridor for those who would

become generals. It works intimately with the Party administering the PAVN Political Commissar—Political Officer System, which in turn manages PAVN's various motivational, indoctrinational, and surveillance programs. It consists of five departments: the Political Officer (*Phong Chinh Tri*) (includes personnel), Agit-Prop and Cultural (*Tuyen Huan*) (includes training), Foreign Relations (*Doi Ngoai*), Organization and Military Security (*To Chuc Va An Ninh*), and Cadre Policy (*Chinh Sach Can Bo*).

2. The General Rear Services Directorate (*Tong Cuc Hau Can*). Another institution dating back to the start of the Viet Minh War,⁹ this Directorate is responsible for organic support activities for PAVN units and elements in the field. Since 1975 it has grown from five to ten departments, which are: Military Construction Department, Military Facilities Management Department, Financial Affairs Department, Military Transport Department, Materials Department, Medical Department, Ordnance Department, Fuel Department, Political Materials Department, and Quartermaster Warehousing Department. It also performs certain other *hau can* (rear services), including administering technical schools.
3. The General Technical Directorate (*Tong Cuc Ky Thuat*). This was created 10 September 1974, near the end of the Vietnam War, when various technical functions were removed from the General Rear Services Directorate and established as a coequal element. Its chief concern is with centralized or more complex military services, most important, weapons maintenance. It consists of four departments: Enterprise Administration Department (heavy-weapon, military-vehicle, and military-machinery maintenance and overhaul and, apparently, ammunition manufacture); Technical Military Research and Training Department; Plans and Personnel Department (including military training abroad); and Cartographic Department. The Directorate also supervises the Vietnamese defense industry, such as it is. Press references to these "national defense factories"¹⁰ are notably lacking in detail and, in any event, capacity is low.
4. The General Economic Construction Directorate (*Tong Cuc Xay Dung Kinh Te*). This is a postwar creation, also a spin-off from the General Rear Services Directorate.¹¹ It is responsible for planning and administering PAVN's various economic activities (discussed below). It consists of two de-

partments: the Construction Department and the Materials Production Department.

The offices of the seven Deputy Chiefs of Staff are fairly small and appear to exist for liaison purposes rather than as commands, as might be expected from their titles. They are involved in planning and coordination work with their respective elements, which are air force, navy, air defense, artillery, armor, mobilization, and intelligence.

As part of this same upper echelon, separate but apparently equal, are a number of military services or commands. These include Military Engineers, Military Communication, Special Operations (formerly Sapper), Chemical Warfare, and possibly others. They report, it appears, to one of the Directorates.

Also at this level—but smaller and with less independent authority—is the PAVN Military Intelligence Department (*Cuc Quan Bao*, literally, Research Department), which apparently is under direct control of the Commander in Chief's Office. It directs all military intelligence activities within Vietnam and administers a structure of military intelligence personnel at corps and military-region levels (and, during the war, in the united front organizations). It runs its own military intelligence school at Son Tay. The department has a large staff operating in Kampuchea.

Command Structure

The PAVN chain of command, in keeping with the rest of the military system, is more complicated than in other armed forces. In effect, three chains of command exist: the Military Commander, the Political Commissar, and the Logistics Officer. Each runs from top to bottom within the system, each independent of but intricately bound up with the other two.

Formally, or, one might say, legally, PAVN is a single monolithic entity. There is only the *army*, no separate Vietnam air force or Vietnam navy, only a PAVN Air Force and a PAVN Navy. Initially, in the Viet Minh War days, there was just army—the other services being mere appendages, if they existed at all. Even today the army dwarfs the other two in size.

The reason for the single entity is traceable to the 1954 Geneva Agreements, to which Hanoi, for tactical and other reasons, sought to adhere in the subsequent two decades. Under terms of

the Agreements the DRV could not augment its military forces. What PAVN had, it could keep, but it could add no new services such as an air force. Hence, when additional services were created they were designated as an integral part of PAVN, that is, a PAVN Navy, a PAVN Air Force, and so on.

Since 1975 there has been extensive development of the air and naval forces as well as a proliferation of other military services. The PAVN-only arrangement engendered a certain amount of restiveness both among top officers and rank and file, the sort of interservice rivalry not unknown elsewhere, and this has resulted in a trend toward separate military identities. Reportedly, Soviet military advisers also have advocated separation of services. The air force and the navy now have distinctive uniforms, insignia, and other outer trappings. However, such separation still is not reflected in formal structure, so the PAVN table of organization lags behind reality.

The PAVN command structure is divided geographically into military theaters and military regions or zones—including a Capital Military Region, Hanoi—and functionally into military corps, then into divisions (or their equivalents), and on down into the basic military units.

The unit at the bottom is not the individual soldier but the three-person cell (*to ba nguoi*), sometimes called the glue-welded cell (*to keo son*), or the three-participant cell (*to tam gia*). Three—the trinity—has always held a mystic appeal, and three as a military-operation unit is efficient; PAVN officers have found that three persons usually work together better than do two or four.

The original geographic division of Vietnam was established by the French and adapted by the Viet Minh–DRV and later by the GVN.

PAVN (and the DRV) in October 1945 divided Vietnam into fourteen regions or zones (*khu*) that three years later were consolidated into six interzones or interregions (*lien khu*); in 1950 they were reorganized into nine interzones plus an autonomous interzone in the Highlands (as concession to the Montagnards) and a special military zone for Hanoi. Later Saigon–Cholon–Gia Dinh became a second special military zone. The nine zones, running from north to south, were: Zones 1, 2, 3 in the North (*Bac Bo*, that is, Tonkin); Zones 4, 5, 6 in the Center (*Trung Bo*, or

GEOGRAPHIC DIVISIONS OF VIETNAM

English	French	Original Viet Minh	Viet Minh (DRV)	GVN
North	Tonkin (Tongking)	Bac ky	Bac bo	Bac phan
Center	Annam	Trung ky	Trung bo	Trung phan
South	Cochin China	Nam ky	Nam bo	Nam phan

Annam); and Zones 7, 8, 9 in the South (*Nam Bo*, or Cochin China). Hanoi, as a special military zone, was under the direct control of the Central Committee. This system was retained after partition in 1954 and, in fact, was employed by communist forces throughout the Vietnam War.

The breakdown of these zones (later, military regions of *quan khu*) in South Vietnam after 1965 was thus:

Zone 5: The provinces of Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Nam, Quang Tin, Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh, Pleiku, Phu Bon, and Phu Yen.

Zone 6: Quang Duc (Gia Nghia), Tuyen Duc (Da Lat), Ninh Thuan, Binh Thuan, Lam Dong, and Binh Tuy.

Zone 7: Phuoc Long, Long Khanh, Phuoc Tuy (Ba Ria), Binh Long, Binh Duong (Thu Dau Mot), Bien Hoa, Tay Ninh, and Hau Nghia.

Zone 8: Long An (Tan An), Kien Tuong (Moc Hoa), Kien Phong (Sa Dec), Dinh Tuong (My Tho), Go Cong, and Kien Hoa (Ben Tre).

Zone 9: Chau Doc, An Giang (Long Xuyen), Vinh Long, Vihn Binh (Tra Vinh), Phong Dinh (Can Tho), Ba Xuyen (Soc Trang), Kien Giang (Ha Tien–Rach Gia), Chuong Thien, Bac Lieu, and An Xuyen (Ca Mau).

The Saigon–Gia Dinh Special Zone.¹²

Military Region 1—Quang Ninh, Cao Bang, Long Son, Ha Tuyen, and Bac Thai provinces—was split into two military regions after the China attack in 1979, but it was not clear from press usage whether there was at that time a renumbering of all the military regions.

The zone system today appears to be used by PAVN regular

forces for certain administrative functions only, having largely been superseded by the theater-corps structure, but the zone system is retained by the paramilitary organizations.

The PAVN command structure in the South always required a special arrangement. During the Viet Minh War there was relatively little military activity in the South, hence no need for a full-scale military headquarters. A command center called the Central Office for the South (*Trung Uong Cuc Mien Nam*, or COSVN) was established in 1951 and was made up of six Party members, some of whom had previous military experience.¹³ In 1955 that office either was abolished or became dormant; it was reorganized and reinstituted in 1958 or 1960. Although discreet about it at the time, after the Vietnam War the centrality of the PAVN High Command in directing the war in the South from start to finish was fully acknowledged. Gen. Hoang Van Thai wrote:

After defeating the French colonialists and liberating one-half the country the Vietnam Revolution entered a new stage of struggle, one in which large new tasks faced the Armed Forces and the General Staff in particular. Under the leadership of the CMPC the General Staff and staff agencies began making positive contributions to the building and developing of a regular force, a modern People's Army, suited to the task of liberating the South. It prepared plans . . . ; researched suitable methods and tactics of warfare; organized a strategic transport system to reinforce the great frontline; aided commanders at various echelons in making successful combat plans for the various battlefields. . . . In keeping with the resolutions of the Central Committee, Politburo and CMPC, the General Staff quickly ascertained the intentions, capabilities and strategic approaches of the [U.S.] enemy and redeployed strategic forces on the battlefield and . . . began to operate on the basis of pre-deployed battle positions, to organize counter-offensives . . . leading to the great victory in the historic Ho Chi Minh Campaign in 1975. . . .¹⁴

Although minor organizational changes were made throughout the years, not until mid-1979, a few months after the China incursion, did the High Command introduce a truly modern operational concept into PAVN. It is called the Indochina Military

Theater of Operations and is a structure superimposed on the existing geographic command structure. Four military theaters of operation were created, designed to defend any particular part of Indochina from outside attack:

Theater A, probably the most important, consists of the tier of provinces along the China border from about Ha Giang on the Song River to Mong Cai on the coast and is structured to oppose an overland invasion from China.

Theater B is the coastal region from the China border to below Da Nang, although it appears concentrated along the Ha Tinh–Da Nang coast; it is designed to oppose an amphibious assault.

Theater L is in northern Vietnam and northern Laos, the extremely rugged terrain running from Lao Cai to Phong Saly in Laos; it is designed to block infiltration from China by Meo forces, something likely in the event of another Sino-Vietnamese War.

Theater K is Kampuchea and is organized both to defend the area from attack from the west, that is, from or through Thailand, and to contain resistance within Kampuchea in the event of an invasion.

The fundamental concept of the theater of operations clearly is to weld the military forces of all three Indochinese states into a single combined command headed by a supreme commander, presumably Vietnamese, able to pursue a coordinated strategy against invasion. Each theater would be expected to defend itself on a more or less self-contained and self-sustaining basis, although, of course, each would be served logistically by Hanoi, and a theater commander could call on all resources within his theater. The Theater L command, for instance, would include the Laotian military forces, and the commander of Theater K could make use of Heng Samrin's People's Republic of Kampuchea Armed Force, such as it is. In advance of war each commander is expected to devise applicable strategies, stockpile supplies, and position his forces in such a way as to best meet attack.

Today the three armed forces of Indochina—PAVN, the Lao People's Liberation Army, and the fledgling People's Republic of Kampuchea Armed Force—are a single military entity, in fact, if not in name. The Lao and Khmer elements may be somewhat

unreliable, but the thinking in Hanoi and the strategic planning process assume participation by all three forces in future wars. Logistic planning also is integrated.

Several times during the Vietnam War the PAVN High Command in Hanoi indicated it was moving toward a joint-command arrangement with the communist forces in Laos and Cambodia. It was suggested in 1965 and again, apparently rather seriously, in 1969 when the idea was broached in conjunction with the periodic "summit" meetings that brought together the leaders of the three Indochinese communist movements. Intelligence reports in the 1970s indicated that a single or combined command of the three military forces actually was created on paper in mid-1970 but never became operational. Now, however, it is clear that introduction of the theater-of-operations concept has created, at least on paper, a single armed force for all of Indochina.

Regular Armed Forces

The massive increase in the size of PAVN required the introduction of the theater-of-operations concept. PAVN grew during the Vietnam War from thirteen divisions (or fifty-five regiments) to twenty-five divisions (1965–75), then after the war to fifty-one divisions and from 400,000 to more than a million men. The present fifty-one divisions consist of thirty-eight infantry divisions and thirteen smaller elements called *economic construction divisions* (discussed below). Of necessity, some loose use of the term *division* occurs here because some units more correctly should be called *brigades*; in addition, there are "training" divisions and support elements such as "engineering" divisions and "transport" divisions.

With the buildup of PAVN came an increase from six to eight in the number of military corps. The Vietnamese air force was increased from three to five air divisions, including one helicopter division. The Vietnamese navy in the three years beginning in 1978 doubled the number of its combat vessels. About the same time, in 1978, PAVN began experimenting with the "combined arms" concept of military organization being pressed by some military schools seeking to develop officers and noncommissioned officers with greater technical background and to push out those who lacked such training. Apparently the effort was a

victim of the invasion of Kampuchea. That invasion served to reinstitute the PAVN Airborne Force (discussed below).

The Military Corps (*Quan Doan*, sometimes *Binh Doan*) concept is a relatively recent addition to the organizational structure of Hanoi's armed forces. It is meant to facilitate "combined arms strategy" and allow for greater mobility. A Party Central Committee directive dated 24 October 1973 established the First Corps as the provinces around Hanoi, apparently to facilitate air defenses. The Second Corps was formed in May 1974 (Huong Giang Corps) in what was called the Tri-Thien area, covering the DMZ between North and South Vietnam and the area around Quang Tri, captured during the 1972 offensive; it was created to facilitate holding the area against counterattack. The Fourth Corps—given the name Cuu Long Corps—was established for the southern Highlands and Cambodia (eastern Nam Bo) on 20 July 1974 and centered around Phuoc Thanh province north of Saigon as part of the preparations for the attack on that province, which came in January 1975. The Third Corps was formed 27 March 1975, in the Ban Me Thuot region of the Highlands of South Vietnam.¹⁵ In the major PAVN buildup in 1979, after the Chinese border war, two additional corps were created: the Chi Lang Army Corps (in March 1979) and the Pac Bo Army Corps (July 1979), both of them in the border area opposite China.

The manpower strength of a PAVN military corps may range from 30,000 to 50,000. Usually it is composed of four infantry divisions but can be three or five. It also contains service and support elements as appropriate and needed. While the corps is functionally important, it appears that the infantry division is still the major PAVN tactical element, a carryover from the days when the foot soldiers counted for all.

A PAVN infantry division consists of about 10,500 men, although most divisions often are understrength. Economic construction divisions usually comprise about 3,000 men. The two training divisions—in which recruits receive basic training—average about 5,000 men each. PAVN's support divisions also are smaller than infantry: eight engineer divisions—4,000 men each, two transport divisions—4,000 men each. Finally, PAVN has some fifteen independent infantry regiments of about 3,000 men each, most of which are on duty in Laos or southern Vietnam.

The PAVN infantry division normally is composed of three infantry regiments (2,500 men each), one artillery regiment, one tank battalion, and the usual support elements. The regiment in turn is divided into battalions (600 men each) and the battalion into companies (200 men each).

As of early 1983 the thirty-eight PAVN infantry divisions were distributed thus: nineteen divisions in Kampuchea: seven on the western border, three along the northern border with Laos, the remainder in central Kampuchea; three divisions in Laos: one in the north and two in the south; sixteen divisions in Vietnam: four north of Hanoi, six in the Hanoi Capital region, and six in central and southern Vietnam.

The Economic Construction Division—which is a division in name only—is an interesting military force and a much-under-rated one. These thirteen divisions are composed largely of older soldiers, including many who fought in the South during the Vietnam War. Each division is fully armed, has a specific mission, and undergoes continual military training. Each also has economic tasks, a common practice among Vietnamese communist military organizations (see discussion below). Under the command of the General Economic Construction Directorate of the High Command, these units build roads, airfields, military barracks, and simple bridges. Mostly, however, they produce food by raising rice and livestock on their own State farms. Many of the divisions are stationed in northern Vietnam in the region between Hanoi and the China border.

When the Chinese invaded Vietnam in early 1979 they met their principal opposition from these construction divisions. Apparently the Chinese, knowing of them in advance from intelligence reports, made the mistake of considering them mere militia—farmers formed into a home guard. These units, filled with veterans of the long war in the South, however, proved to be battlewise, cool under fire, and highly skilled in guerrilla-war tactics. It was, in fact, the best kind of military force to throw against a tank-led army slowly advancing down the confines of narrow mountain passes. The construction divisions probably were militarily more effective against the Chinese than would have been the so-called crack divisions from Hanoi, composed of younger, unblooded soldiers.

PAVN's major combat services supporting the Infantry—Artillery, Armor, Air Defense, and Special Operations—are organized along standard lines of armies elsewhere. Each consists of a force, or command, whose commanding officer reports to the General Staff Directorate.

Birth date of the PAVN Artillery Force officially is 29 June 1946 with the creation of what was called the PAVN Capital Artillery Group. It consisted initially of forty artillery pieces, chiefly 27mm and 75mm, of French or Japanese make. The first artillery attack is recorded as 19 December 1946, the shelling of Fort Lang in Hanoi.¹⁶

The Artillery Force today consists of ten regiments of about 1,500 men each. It is equipped with Soviet, Chinese, and captured American weapons although weaponry is now being upgraded by new Soviet material. Field artillery weapons include 76mm field guns and 122mm howitzers and field guns; 85mm, 100mm, and 130mm Soviet field guns; and 152mm Soviet howitzers. In Kampuchea PAVN Artillery has made extensive use of captured American 105mm howitzers. The basic operational unit, the artillery company, normally will have twelve guns as well as anti-aircraft weapons, which range from 23mm to 100mm.

The PAVN Armored Force was created by the 12th Plenum in March 1957, but not until 5 October 1959 was the first unit, the 202d Tank Regiment of thirty T-34 tanks and sixteen self-propelled guns, actually commissioned. First PAVN tanker combat is officially listed as 24 January 1968, when elements of the 203d Armored Regiment operating out of Laos engaged ARVN forces at Ta May on Highway 9 near Khe Sanh, the initial action of a planned attack on the United States Special Forces camp at Lang Vei and a coordinated part of the 1968 Tet Offensive, Lang Vei was raided the night of 6–7 February by thirteen PT-76 tanks. Armor was used sparingly during the next several years. The Armored Force figured prominently but was not militarily successful in the 1972 Easter Offensive. During that campaign PAVN tanks outnumbered ARVN tanks but were badly mauled, chiefly because the tank troops were inexperienced. Tank 843, a T-54 from the 203d Armored Brigade, commanded by Capt. Bui Quang Than, smashed down the iron gate of Saigon's Independence Palace at 11:30 A.M. on 30 April 1975, the symbolic ending of the

Vietnam War. In 1978 the 203d Tank Regiment led the invasion of Kampuchea.

Currently the Armored Force consists of about seven regiments of 1,500 men each, with a total inventory of about 2,500 tanks, although these are 1982 figures and the force apparently has grown considerably since the war in Kampuchea bogged down and greater use has been made of armor. The Force now is equipped with a large number of T-72 tanks, the most sophisticated of Soviet-built tanks, carrying 125mm guns and fitted for swamp use. Its inventory also includes Soviet T-55s, T-54s, T-34s, and PT-76s as well as captured U.S. M-113 Military Personnel Carriers (MPCs) and Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs) and trucks of all types. Most of the trucks now used by PAVN are Soviet made. In addition, most PAVN combat units have self-propelled antiaircraft weapons for front-line use against tactical air power.¹⁷

The Air Defense Corps was created 1 April 1953 as a separate element in the Field Artillery Command.¹⁸ During the Viet Minh War PAVN's troops manned light antiaircraft weapons at bases near the China border, then at Dien Bien Phu against French supply planes. The 12th Plenum in 1957 authorized upgrading of the corps to the Air Defense Force, but it was not until 1962 that it was detached from the Field Artillery Command and made a separate command under the PAVN Air Force. The PAVN Radar Force was created on 1 March 1959 and two days later supposedly detected a C-47 commando operation into North Vietnam. The USSR has since installed a chain of six radar centers (fifty sites) from Nha Trang north that can track incoming aircraft at a distance of about 100 miles.

With the advent of missile warfare, the Air Defense Force was divided into two parts. The first, still called the Air Defense Force, manned antiaircraft artillery weapons; the second became the Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) Force. With the start of intensive air war in 1966, the SAM Force was detached from the Air Force and placed directly under the Military General Staff Directorate and renamed the Air Defense Missile Force. There it remained until the end of the war, after which it reverted to the Air Force.

According to official history, PAVN's "missile troops," as they are called, fought their first battle 24 July 1965, against Ameri-

can planes attacking the Bat Bat area of Ha Tay province, supposedly downing three F-4 jets.¹⁹ The date has become the Missile Command's "tradition day."

During the Vietnam War, the Air Defense Force and the Air Defense Missile Force manned about 650 antiaircraft sites throughout North Vietnam, with a total of some 7,000 AAA weapons. The strategy was to use regular AAA weapons against low-flying aircraft and the SAMs against high altitude attackers. Since the incoming planes often were at both high and low altitudes and the defenders were in two separate organizations, coordination problems never were satisfactorily solved. Nevertheless, PAVN air defenses in the Vietnam War were the most effective and sophisticated the world had ever seen in action—far surpassing the primitive defenses of London, Berlin, and Tokyo during World War II.

The official wartime claim for PAVN air defenses was 4,154 U.S. planes shot down. The official number recorded by the United States is 1,096.²⁰ PAVN's history of the war continues:

In one battle one missile brought down two airplanes. In another battle three missiles shot down three airplanes. On one day eight strategic B-52 bombers were shot down. Especially, between 18 and 28 December 1972, they fought very skillfully, bravely, and creatively, achieved glorious feats of arms, won a very great victory—shooting down 37 U.S. airplanes, including 32 B-52's, most of them on the spot—and contributed very importantly to defeating the large-scale strategic raids against the North carried out by the strategic and tactical air forces of the U.S. imperialists.²¹

The Air Defense Force apparently does not employ the military-region structure but is organized by functional units: thirteen surface-to-air missile (SAM) regiments of about 13,000 men each, defending some 60 sites using SA-2 and SA-3 missiles; four AA brigades of 1,500 men each, using 57mm and 100mm weapons; paramilitary AAA units at perhaps 1,000 sites, using 23mm and 37mm weapons.

The PAVN Special Operations Force (*Bo Tu Lenh Dac Cong*), a postwar creation, is, along with its predecessors, perhaps the most interesting of all services. Its major element is the famed Sapper Command (*Su Doan Dac Cong*) of the Vietnam War era,

and before that the Sapper Combat Arm of the Viet Minh War. The other major element of the SOF is the Airborne Command.

The *Dac Cong* (frequently translated by Hanoi as "Special Attack Force," or "sapper troops,") are the darlings of PAVN. They are surrounded by a special aura that the High Command always has sought to enhance. The term *sapper* in strict usage means a military engineer skilled at use of demolition explosives in warfare; as used in PAVN, however, it is closer to the idea of a commando or the U.S. Green Berets, although PAVN also has the orthodox sapper whose duty is to destroy enemy roadblocks and other fortifications that impede advance. The "commando" sappers operating in South Vietnam during the war were of three basic types: field (or rural), city (for operations in urban areas), and water (to attack targets in the rivers and canals).

From the earliest days PAVN generals have paid special tribute to sapper warfare, raising it as a military art form far above the level of other armies, and they have come to regard it as almost exclusively theirs. Sapper troops are portrayed as exemplifying the idealized Vietnamese military prowess: small self-contained units, employing cleverness, clandestinism, and stealth, striking with unbelievable precision and destructive force. In the words of a SOF senior colonel: "Sapper fighting is a living symbol of our national character and soul, our indomitable fighting will, our creative energies. Sapper fighting is the essence of Vietnam."²² Entrance requirements are strict: Party member nomination plus two seconds by Party members; "ideological purity"; youth (average sapper age is probably about twenty-one); and a certain character (boldness, willingness to take risks). Sapper teams (of three or four) are formed into detachments (of five to seven teams); five detachments make up a battalion, which is the unit with which the individual sapper identifies; for administrative purposes five battalions make up a sapper regiment.

The Sapper Command's motto was supposedly supplied by Ho Chi Minh, who, during a visit, observed: "Sapping means military action. Sapping is a great honor. Sapping requires special effort."²³

This, of course, is the stuff of military glamour, the challenge to heroic deeds. If there are war lovers in PAVN they are found on sapper teams. The spirit, however, also reflects PAVN's her-

itage, its original “guerrilla” nature, as well as the mystique surrounding guerrilla and commando warfare.

Sappers played a key role in both the Viet Minh and the Vietnam wars. Their strikes often were bold and deadly. However, reports of sapper “suicide squads” and “suicide missions” over the years probably were exaggerated; the number of fanatics indifferent to pain or death is about as small in PAVN as it is in other military organizations. What often seemed to be a suicide mission was an act of credulity: a seventeen-year-old is persuaded to hop off a motorcycle, carry a satchel charge into a police headquarters, and be away before the enemy is alerted; he may not know (or may not be told) that a 50-caliber machine gun on the roof of the headquarters is manned day and night and will cut him down at the gate. (Even if he does know, he may believe speed and surprise will carry the day.) Thus when cut down at the gate, his act is seen as a fanatic making a sacrifice, which PAVN has no interest in correcting.

Sapper teams were the first true PAVN combat elements to fight in the South, some units claiming action as early as 1957. As the official history puts it:

Sappers fought tens of thousands of large and small battles, annihilated more than 30,000 of the enemy, including tens of thousands of Americans . . . wiped out nine division command posts . . . destroyed 6,000 enemy aircraft on the ground, 1,600 artillery pieces, nearly 9,000 vehicles, 2.7 million tons of bombs, sank or damaged 400 ships, blew up 100 buildings from three to seven stories . . . killed tyrants and eliminated spies. . . .²⁴

As the war progressed, PAVN commanders sought to inculcate a greater emphasis on technology and less on romantic heroism among sapper troops. Gen. Van Tien Dung frequently lectured that sapper combat, as he put it, was both an art and a science. Indeed, late in the war, particularly in late 1968 and 1969 with the advent of the so-called superguerrilla (a new kind of sapper), science did come into its own. Sapper troops were equipped with the best technological hardware—explosives, remote control devices, communication systems, and such—that Moscow’s research and development laboratories could devise.

The other major element of the Special Operations Force is

the Airborne Command. The first airborne unit, the 305th Airborne Brigade, was formed in 1965, apparently with considerable Chinese assistance; but no use was found for it, so it was converted into the 305th Sapper Division. In mid-1978 the 305th was reconstituted as an Airborne Brigade.

The SOF apparently has other smaller elements, including an amphibious commando unit, about which little is known. There are at present no PAVN marines as such, although the Hanoi military journals in recent years have carried articles about the concept of marine troops,²⁵ and possibly the SOF may develop an arm with this capability. There does exist something called the Marine Self-Defense Force (discussed below), that consists of seagoing paramilitary units that patrol the estuaries and coastal waterways that characterize so much of the Vietnamese shoreline, protecting against possible Chinese commando raids. These units are not offensive amphibious strike forces as are the U.S. Marines.²⁶

The Vietnamese navy officially was created as the PAVN Riverine and Maritime Force on 7 May 1955 and became a separate entity, initially called the Coastal Defense Force, on 12 October 1959. Today, however, PAVN Navy's anniversary, or "tradition day," is listed as 5 August 1964, the date of the Tonkin Gulf incident, "when one of our torpedo squadrons chased the destroyer USS *Maddox* from our coastal waters, our first victory over the U.S. Navy."²⁷

Earlier, during the Viet Minh War, PAVN operated the so-called mosquito fleet, small but sturdy vessels called "infiltration trawlers" that were supplied by the Chinese and used chiefly to run military supplies in from China through the complex coastal waterways. The first true naval combat vessels were four Swatow-class gunboats from China, which arrived in 1958. At the same time, the East Germans sent Hanoi several PT boats, which were called the Vietnam-German Friendship Fleet.

In the late 1950s the naval force was "regularized" and given additional duties, including coast-guard work and patrol of Vietnam's fishing waters. During the 1960s there was naval buildup with the arrival of twenty-eight gunboats from China (twenty-four Swatow class, four Shanghai class), four Komar-class gunboats from the USSR, and 30 torpedo boats, mostly from the USSR (PT-4 and PT-6 types).

Although in the Vietnam War the PAVN Navy was no match for the U.S. Navy, official SRV history would have it otherwise:

In a period of 20 years [1955–1975], dating from its formation on May 7, 1955, our People's Navy fought thousands of battles with the U.S.-puppet navy, air force and infantry, sank 353 warships, boats, and military cargo ships, killed 2,000 of the enemy, destroyed hundreds of thousands of tons of enemy weapons and war facilities, heavily damaged 45 ships of various kinds, including such ships as the cruiser *Newport News*, the destroyer *Washington*, etc., shot down 118 airplanes, knocked out 34 tanks, and dismantled or destroyed thousands of enemy torpedoes and bombs. In the second war of destruction of Nixon [1972], it detected and destroyed nearly 900 torpedoes, and kept the principal channels open to traffic. It transported nearly 300,000 tons of cargo of various kinds to the battlefields.²⁸

At the end of the Vietnam War the PAVN Navy was given coastal-defense and sea-surveillance duties. Its official mission is:

To defend the rivers and seas of the Fatherland . . . to defend the coast of 3,000 kilometers in length from Mui Ngoc to Ha Tien and an immense sea area with thousands of islands . . . to defend the sea space of our beloved Vietnamese Fatherland, closely manage the sea, patrol the islands, maintain security and assure the normal activities of the fishermen and others on the sea. . . . The requirement of combat readiness is a permanent requirement of the Navy . . . must include armed forces on the water and ashore, both fixed and mobile combat forces, reserve forces and production forces. . . .²⁹

The USSR has supplied the PAVN Navy with at least thirteen missile-attack boats. Ten of those are the most modern type in the Soviet Navy, the PTG OSA Class II (240 tons, 40 meters, carrying four SSN-2 STYX surface-to-surface missiles); the other three are the older Komar missile-attack boats. Other vessels supplied to the PAVN Navy include: (1) two light frigates of the Peya I class (1,140 tons, 82 meters), used for coastal defense and antisubmarine patrol, carrying rocket launchers, torpedo mounts, and 76mm guns; (2) three or more of the Polish-built amphibious assault-landing ships (LSMs) of the Polnocny class (1,000 tons, 80 meters); (3) at least two Foxtrot-class diesel-powered attack submarines (2,000 tons, 91 meters); (4) two SO-1 coast-escort boats

with 25mm guns and rocket launchers; (5) several Shersen torpedo boats, 30mm antiaircraft guns, and four torpedo tubes; (6) one Poti subchaser; and (7) one T-58 fleet minesweeper.

Some of these Vietnamese warships are equipped with SSN-3 antiship missiles (twenty-one mile range), SSN-2 STYX missiles (thirty-mile range), and SS-21 Frog and SS-23 Scud missiles, the latter two being tactical nuclear weapons. Thus the USSR has given the Vietnamese navy nuclear capability, and while it is not believed that Vietnam is supplied with nuclear warheads, obviously that option is always open to the Soviets.

This Soviet contribution has been added to the fleet inherited during the takeover of the South. The South Vietnamese navy inventory at the time of the fall of the GVN was about 940 vessels, most of which were riverine junk craft used to patrol rivers, canals, and coastal waterways. Included were two destroyers, seven coast escorts, three coastal minesweepers, fourteen landing craft; twenty patrol boats, and a fast troop transport. However, it has been reliably estimated that in the last days of the war at least one-third of the 940 vessels was destroyed in combat or sabotaged by their crews so as to render them inoperative.

The senior naval command post is the Vietnam Naval Commander in Chief, who reports to the Military Staff Directorate in Hanoi. The top operational command post is Commander, Vietnam Naval Forces, headquartered in Haiphong. Both of these top naval posts currently are held by Maj. Gen. Nguyen Ba Phat.

The Vietnam Naval Forces headquarters in Haiphong harbor administers five Naval Regions, whose headquarters are Haiphong, Vinh, Da Nang, Vung Tau, and Rach Gia. In addition, there are major naval installations or facilities at Van Hoa, Ha Tou, Hon Gai, Quang Yen, Quang Khe, Cam Ranh, Nha Trang, Ho Chi Minh City, Can Tho, and Phu Quoc Island.

The navy is organized into fleets, or groups, that are broken down into naval brigades. The Ham Tu Fleet is in northern waters directed strategically at China; its Chuong Duong Brigade is designed to oppose amphibious landings, and its Kiet Brigade is assigned to defend the offshore islands and to perform troop-transport duties. The Bach Dang Fleet serves in the South, often in Kampuchean waters. Its Ham Tu Naval Brigade was formed in 1975, and 80 percent of its personnel are former South Viet-

namese navy men. It operates almost entirely in Kampuchea. The naval brigades vary in size, and some apparently are independent of a fleet.³⁰ A brigade is divided into naval battalions, and usually there are at least six such battalions in each Naval Region.

The navy's strength in 1983 was estimated at about 12,000 and was growing rapidly. Under Soviet encouragement and assistance it had become the largest naval force in Southeast Asia, with a total of some 1,500 vessels, the majority of them riverine junk craft.³¹

The present navy inventory is estimated as: principal combat vessels: 2; patrol boats: 192; amphibious warfare ships: 51; landing ships: 104; auxiliary craft: 133; junk craft: 950; and civil maritime vessels: 95, including 80 coastal freighters (about half of which are under 1,000 tons), 12 oil tankers, and 15 ocean-going freighters flying a flag of convenience (Panama) out of Hong Kong. Vietnam also has several thousand coastal fishing vessels. However, in calculating present Vietnamese naval strength, account must be taken of the boat people's vessels, including river and naval craft that have left in the past several years. Certainly the total number of vessels in Vietnam today is several thousand less than in 1975.

The Vietnamese People's Air Force (VPAF), as it is now called, began as the PAVN 919th Military Air Transport Squadron, founded 1 May 1959, using transport planes left by the departing French and a few supplied later by the Chinese. It was converted into a fledgling air force in early 1965. The first air action recorded was on the night of 15 February 1965 when a PAVN pilot in a T-38 shot down a C-123 transport plane supposedly on a spy mission from South Vietnam. Historians also claim that much earlier, on 7 March 1960, while still the 919th Air Transport Squadron, a pilot sunk a "commando ship of the Saigon Navy."³² However, PAVN now fixes 3 April 1965, the day its fighter pilots first went into action against the United States, as its "tradition day."

On 3 April 1965, during a battle against U.S. airplanes in the sky above Do Len-Ham Rong, our Air Force, in coordination with the Anti-Aircraft Force, shot down 10 enemy airplanes. The team led by Pham Ngoc Lan shot down two F-8 jets in the first battle fought by our Air Force. The next day, on 4 April,

the team led by Tran Hanh shot down two F-105 jets in the same area.³³

The claimed VPAF record during the Vietnam War is impressive:

During 10 years of contending with the modern air force and navy of the U.S. imperialists, our People's Air Force built a glorious tradition: Be limitlessly loyal, attack resolutely, fight together, and achieve collective merit. In more than 300 battles it shot down 320 U.S. airplanes of 19 types [including 2 B-52s], destroyed 24 airplanes, sunk or set afire 6 warships or commando ships, heavily damaged 3,300 military bases, and contributed worthily to smashing the prestige of American air power, along with the soldiers and people of the entire nation defeated two wars of aggression waged by the U.S. imperialists against the North, and contributed to the defeat of their neocolonial war of aggression in the South. One regiment shot down more than 100 airplanes; one company shot down more than 60 airplanes; and many pilots achieved outstanding feats of arms. Most outstanding was the feat of arms of 27 and 28 December 1972, when the People's Air Force shot down five enemy airplanes, including two B-52s shot down on the spot, thus contributing to smashing the enemy's largescale air raids on Hanoi and Hai Phong.³⁴

The Soviet build-up of North Vietnamese air power began to taper off late in the war, and this trend continued into the postwar years until the Chinese attack on Vietnam in 1979, when a new build-up effort was launched. The PAVN Air Force as of early 1983 had a total inventory of about 900 planes, including at least 200 MiG fighter planes, mostly MiG 21s and possibly some MiG-23s.³⁵ It also included whatever was left of the 400 U.S. jet fighters captured in the South. Some of these planes were seen operating in Kampuchea as late as 1982, although it is believed that because of aging, poor maintenance and lack of spare parts, probably less than one-third of the aircraft acquired in 1975 was still operable in 1983.

Vietnamese pilots trained in the USSR now fly MiGs as well as TU-16 Badger bombers on anti-ship reconnaissance and electronic warfare missions, and SU-22 Fitter Swing-wing bombers used for ground support. The Vietnamese Air Force has re-

ceived at least 60 bombers from the USSR. It has also received MI-24 Hinds attack helicopters for use in Kampuchea in counterinsurgency operations; MI-8 helicopters, the most heavily armed, and the MI-14 Haze and the KA-25 Hormone helicopters, for anti-submarine patrolling.

The basic operational element of the Vietnam Air Force is the air regiment and currently seventeen of these are grouped as Air Divisions (the equivalent to the Military Region) and headquartered at Noi Bai (Hanoi), Da Nang, Tho Xuan and Tan Son Nhut. The seventeen Air Regiments are:

- Seven attack fighter plane regiments (450 planes)
- Four basic and advanced training regiments (225 trainers)
- Three cargo transport regiments (350)
- Three helicopter regiments (600)

In addition there are smaller combat units including a light bomber force.

The Air Force is commanded by Major General Dao Dinh Luyen (former missile officer). He reports to the General Staff Directorate. The Vietnam Air Force headquarters is at Bac Mai Air Base outside of Hanoi.

The Vietnamese Air Force, like the Navy, has come into its own since the end of the Vietnam War. It now consists of some 1,500 planes and 15,000 to 20,000 personnel. This makes it the largest air force in Southeast Asia, that is, between China and India.

There was no use of air power by PAVN during the Viet Minh War, not even a great deal of air defense effort. After the war the DRV inherited some DC-3 (Dakota) transport planes from the French and later received some Czech trainer planes and Soviet helicopters. Plans for a full-scale air force began in 1962 and the present Air Force came into existence in 1964. Almost all of the initial assistance came from China which supplied North Vietnam with MiG-15 and MiG-17 fighter planes, MI-1 helicopters, YAK-18 trainers and cargo planes, most of it of Soviet manufacture given to China during the Korean War.

In February 1965, with the start of American bombing and air strikes into North Vietnam, the Soviet Union launched a major effort to build up DRV air defenses and develop Hanoi's Air

Force. During the Vietnam War many of the fighter planes were stationed in China, at fields just over the border, and would occasionally challenge American attackers, but in general were not much of a match for them.

Conquest of South Vietnam in 1975 added about 1,500 planes to Hanoi's inventory along with some ninety airfields, eight of which were all-weather with mile-long runways, modern air traffic control equipment and repair facilities. Seventeen major air bases now are in operation throughout Vietnam.

The strategic utilization of the Vietnamese Air Force from its inception to early 1979, with the invasion of Kampuchea, was almost entirely defensive. The Air Force existed to defend North Vietnam from American air attack and then, after the end of the Vietnam War, to protect it from attack by China. This remains its primary strategic purpose. However, it has increasingly developed offensive capability—chiefly through its attack helicopter regiments—for use in Kampuchea and presumably, should the need arise, against China. Its sixty bombers would be used for the same purpose.

The PAVN Air Force made a first tentative venture into space flight in 1981 when Lt. Col. Pham Tuan took part in the USSR's Soyuz 37 mission, a link-up with the orbiting Soviet space lab, Salyut Six. Tuan was the sixth bloc pilot and the first Asian to make such a journey. He had been a fighter pilot during the Vietnam War—having received combat training in the USSR in 1967–68—and scored several kills including (said a USSR biography) one U.S. B-52. After the war he returned to the USSR for a year of space flight training. Joint Vietnam-USSR space flight is a psychologically based effort, and has no strategic meaning as far as Hanoi is concerned. The launching at Baykonur City Cosmodome on 23 July 1981, for instance, was only attended by Le Duan and General Vo Nguyen Giap. Vietnam does have a Space Research Commission headed by a civilian, Tran Dai Nghia, which apparently monitors space travel and research by other countries.

The last of the major PAVN commands to be considered here, also the youngest, is the PAVN Border Defense Force, created in 1979. Its forerunner was the People's Armed Public Security Force (PAPSF) (formed 3 March 1959). While internal security

throughout North Vietnam was the PAPSFS assignment from the start, there was little internal resistance, hence most of the perceived threat was in the Highlands with the Montagnards and from across the border from China, Laos and South Vietnam; early activity was concentrated in these areas. The PAPSFS was under the control of the Ministry of Interior and acted as a sort of combined border guard and in some respects, national police. It was also responsible for preventing smuggling and illegal movement of people out of Vietnam.

In October 1979, chiefly because of increased Chinese subversive activity in the border region, the PAPSFS was reorganized, expanded, and ultimate authority transferred to the Ministry of Defense in Hanoi. Its strength in 1985 was about 65,000. It was mainly responsible for all border patrol work, coastal surveillance and internal security and anti-sabotage efforts, the latter chiefly in the tier of provinces along the China border. While descriptions of the Border Defense Force portray it as nationwide, as far as is known it does not operate as a border patrol along either the Kampuchea or Laos frontiers. However, there have been press references to its units on internal security duty in Ho Chi Minh City.³⁶

Apparently the Border Defense Force remains something of a mix of PAVN paramilitary and Ministry of Interior APPSFS units. It is divided into three sub-commands: those elements and units, usually organized by battalion, that operate border check points and patrol the frontier; a PAVN Navy force operating patrol boats in the complex waterways along the coast, and also bearing responsibility for security on the coastal islands; and an upgraded paramilitary force composed largely of Montagnards which provides security in the mountainous regions above the border with China.

As is apparent in the composition and operation of the PAVN Border Defense Force, the function of internal security in Vietnam—officially defined as “political security, public order and safety,” and meaning both anti-crime and anti-espionage/sabotage activities—is not sharply compartmentalized. In theory, the security function is spread across the entire system making it the responsibility of everyone. In administrative terms, responsibility for Vietnamese internal security is vested jointly in PAVN and

the Ministry of the Interior. Some security units are exclusively PAVN, some exclusively Interior, others are jointly manned. The major PAVN elements of the "military police" are the Military Police, Military Control Police,³⁷ Naval Shore Patrol, and internal security elements, chiefly the Military Intelligence Service.³⁸ The "security police" are the Ministry of the Interior's Armed Public Security Force (APSF)—at least 50,000—plus several smaller more specialized elements. Certain paramilitary organizations, that is, militia and self-defense units, also have security duties, although these seem to be more on the order of rural police. Of the estimated 200,000 persons assigned to fulltime security duties, about half are Ministry of the Interior and half PAVN regulars. The Military Police seem to confine themselves to policing off-duty behavior and the press frequently criticizes them for their failure to curb soldier drunkenness, rowdiness, refusal to pay restaurant bills, use of hand grenades to fish in streams, black marketing, smuggling, stealing ducks, cutting trees and fences for fireworks, and so on.³⁹

Notes—Chapter 4

1. The Regular Army (early 1950s) consisted of seven divisions (about 80,000 men) plus a Main Force (*chu luc*) of 120,000. The guerrillas (*du kich*), numbering perhaps 200,000 were considered to be local and “semi-military.” PAVN internal documents at the time usually employed the terms Permanent Force (the regulars), Rear Force (the paramilitary), plus a Strategic Rear Force (unmobilized manpower reserve).

2. General Giap at one time during the Vietnam War held six positions: member of the Politburo Central Committee; DRV vice prime minister; deputy chairman of the DRV National Defense Council; secretary of the Central Military Party Committee; DRV Minister of National Defense and Commander in Chief of PAVN.

3. These are figures from conservative estimates. The Chinese estimated that the PAVN regional self-defense force, even before the present buildup began, was 2.5 million rather than the 1.6 million listed here. See *Weapons' World* (Beijing) No. 9, May 1975. Thai intelligence sources fix the paramilitary force at 10 million, but apparently this includes the unmobilized reserve. Some Hanoi press references combine the paramilitary forces (except the Armed Youth Assault Force in the South), totaling about 2.1 million, and call it the Strategic Rear Force. As such it is conceived as the entire back-up force for the regular military. Within this concept, the Tactical Rear Force which backs up the Paramilitary Force consists of the culls left when most able-bodied men have been mobilized. To make matters worse for the researcher/analyst, these military classifications have been undergoing almost constant change in recent years.

4. DRV Second Constitution, Article 65.

5. The wartime NDC consisted of Chairman Ton Duc Thang, Vice Chairmen Pham Van Dong and Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap and six members: Generals Van Tien Dung, Chu Van Tan, and Song Hao; Security Chief Tran Quoc Hoan, Hguyen Van Tran (Party personnel); and Foreign Affairs Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh.

6. As envisioned by the French, circa early 1950, the PAVN chain of command consisted of the High Command (Minister of Defense, Commander in Chief and General Staff) the CMPC, and a supply staff. Under the General Staff was Personnel, Intelligence, Liaison (with other DRV elements), Operations (i.e., G-3) and Information-Education. The CMPC or Party *apparat* was responsible for the armed propaganda teams, Party organization within PAVN, counter-intelligence and political security; it also had its own administrative section. The supply staff was divided into four sections: transport, ordnance, ammunition and med-

ical supplies. Administration was organized geographically into Inter-zones which were broken down into Zones and Special Zones (and controlled the paramilitary troops); and functionally, that is, infantry divisions, regiments (and independent regiments) and battalions. With the exception of the Party *apparatus* this was probably a correct assessment. See Bernard Fall's *Le Viet Minh*.

7. Lt. Gen. Hoang Van Thai, "Training Commanders and Staff Cadres in Modern Warfare," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Sept. 1982.

8. Those familiar with the early organizational structure of the PLA say that the original PAVN High Command structure closely resembled the Chinese model, which suggests a high degree of Chinese influence in organizing PAVN.

9. See Fall's *Le Viet Minh* for description of this Directorate during the Viet Minh War. Fall was vastly impressed by the work of this Directorate and ascribed much of the credit for victory in the Viet Minh War to its performance of "economic miracles." Within PAVN the mundane subject of logistics does tend to have a mystique and glamour not found in other armies.

10. *Nhan Dan*, June 4, 1982.

11. Plans for this Directorate were announced in April 1975 and it actually came into being on 1 January 1976. It was assigned five specific tasks: 1. To be the Ministry of National Defense planning agency for postwar economic construction projects involving PAVN troops and resources; 2. To supervise overall administration of PAVN economic activity; 3. To act as the MND agent in negotiating construction and production contracts with other ministries and with provincial and local state organs; 4. To keep the books and fiscally manage PAVN economic affairs; 5. To supervise the corps of special PAVN technical units that were converted from PAVN to civilian agencies but kept on MND rolls as reserve units. See VNA, April 20, 1975.

12. Taken from Gen. Tran Van Tra, *History of the Bulwark B-2 Theater*, 1982. Names of provinces are GVN designations, most of which have now been changed.

13. The original COSVN six were Le Duan, Le Duc Tho, Pham Hung, Ha Huy Giap, Ung Van Khiem and Thuong Vu (AKA Thuang Nam).

14. Gen. Hoang Van Thai, *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, September 1982.

15. *Anti-US Resistance War 1954-75*. PAVN Publishing House, Hanoi, May 1980.

16. A brief history of the PAVN Artillery Force is found in Maj. Gen. Doan Tue's "Thirty Years of Development and Combat by Artillery Troops," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, June 1976.

17. For an interesting discussion of tank warfare in Vietnam, see Simon Dunstan's *Vietnam Tracks: Armor in Battle 1945-75*. See also Sen. Col. Le Xuan Kien, "Tank Shock Power in Offensive Campaigns," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, August 1982. See also, "Armored Combat Arm: 25 Years of Growth and Victory," by Maj. Gen. Le Xuan Kien in *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Sept. 1984 (JPRS SEA 84-168).
18. Some Hanoi press reports list its founding date as March 29, 1953. It is now called the PAVN Air Defense Force.
19. The U.S. Air Force at the time recorded the outcome of this first appearance of SAMs in Vietnam as one U.S. 4-FC Phantom jet downed and three damaged and the scene as forty miles northwest of Hanoi. Target of the raid was a munitions dump.
20. This is the total number of American fixed wing aircraft lost over North Vietnam. The total number of fixed wing aircraft lost in all of Southeast Asia during the war was 3,726 (2,651 due to hostile action). Total helicopter loss due either to hostile action or operational causes was 4,869 (of which only 12 were lost in North Vietnam). See "South-east Asia Statistical Summary" prepared by the Department of Defense OASD Directorate for Information Operations, October 1973.
21. *Military Events*, page 37. This latter reference was to the so-called Christmas bombing of 1972 which, whatever else, had extraordinary residual effect on the PAVN Missile Command, and is reflected in post-war writings. Until that moment the Command had never experienced full scale air war and had not realized how devastating it could be. See Maj. Gen. Hoang Van Khan, PAVN Air Force commander interview in VNA, July 23, 1980.
22. Sen. Col. Bach Ngoc Lien, "The Few to Fight the Many," in *Nhan Dan*, Dec. 19, 1979. See also his "Art of Attack by Special Operations Force," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, March 1982.
23. Quoted in the author's *The Viet Cong Strategy of Terror*, Chapter 4, "Technology of Terror," 1971.
24. Quoted in *Military Events*. For an especially interesting description of the *dac cong* concept, which traces its roots back to the 13th century, see Sai Dong, "The 'Dac Cong', A Special Army of the Vietnam People's Army," in *Vietnam Courier*, No. 11, Nov. 1984. See also "Sapper Troops in Modern Combat" by Sen. Col. Nguyen Chi in *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, No. 2, February 1983.
25. See Lt. Col. Nguyen Dang Hai, "The Marines and Amphibious Landings," in *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, No. 2, February 1984.
26. The Special Operations Force observes March 19, 1967 as its anniversary, the day when Ho Chi Minh visited its Command headquarters.

27. *Military Events*. The Tonkin Gulf naval clashes were on the nights of August 2/3 and 4/5; the second of these was chosen as the anniversary date apparently because that was the night "our torpedo squadrons chased the destroyer Maddox from our coastal waters," as the citation here puts it. If the Gulf of Tonkin incident is a myth invented by the Pentagon, as some revisionist historians claim, the PAVN Navy is now part of the conspiracy. Some Hanoi publications list August 22, 1965 as the PAVN Navy's "anniversary date." Dates listed in *Military Events* for the Maddox encounter are correct.

28. *Military Events*.

29. *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, July 1975.

30. There is a naval element operating out of the Ham Tu Headquarters called a Naval Security Unit (*Hai Doan Canh Ve*) which patrols the southern coast to protect offshore oil rigs, prevent the escape of boat people, and combat Thai pirates who prey on Vietnamese fishermen. See *Tien San*, July 27, 1980.

31. By comparison, the Chinese Navy currently has some 700 combat ships and some 400 support ships.

32. *Vietnam Courier*, No. 11, November 1984. The same article says the 919th Military Air Transport later became the Vietnam General Department of Civil Aviation and had, by May 1984, transported three million passengers and made 1,800 flights abroad with only one accident; it now flies Soviet-made Tu-134s, Illushin 18s, Yak 40s, as well as several DC-3s and at least one Boeing 727 captured in South Vietnam.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

35. Thai intelligence officers in early 1983 reported higher figures, stating that PAVN had in operation 103 MiG-15s and 17s; 40 Mig-19s; 223 Mig-21s as well as 400 U.S.-made jet fighters formerly belonging to Saigon, that is to the Vietnam Air Force (VNAF). These figures appear to be high. Certainly the number of operable ex-VNAF planes is far less than the 1975 inventory, which this figure represented. Thai Air Force Commander in Chief Marshal Daklaew Susilvorn told an interviewer in early 1983 that the PAVN Air Force was now flying some 220 MiG-21 fighter planes against Khmer resistance, along with MI-8 Soviet assault helicopters. Late in 1984 he said MiG-23 jet fighters were stationed in Vietnam. *Asian Defence Journal* (Kuala Lumpur), April 1983; *Nation Review*, Bangkok, Feb. 21, 1983 and *Bangkok Post*, Nov. 12, 1984.

36. For description of Border Defense Force see the article by its commander, Maj. Gen. Dinh Van Tuy, "Glorious Tradition of the Border

Defense Troops Victoriously Fulfilling All Their Missions,” in *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, No. 2, Feb. 1984.

37. Members on patrol wear a red band on their left arm reading *Quan Quan* (Military Control) and carry two different identification cards to be shown when exercising their authority (false documentation is common among criminals and others) *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, June 12, 1981.

38. There has always been considerable overlap between security and intelligence personnel. See Maj. Gen. Vo Bam, “PAVN Military Inspector and Control Work in the New Stage” in *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Sept. 1977, for discussion. General Bam cites CMPC Directive 86-QU/TW, June 1976, which he says fixed the basic responsibilities of each control agency.

39. VNA, August 19, 1981.

CHAPTER 5

Paramilitary Forces

Standing alongside the regular army in Vietnam is an even larger and vastly more complex military institution, here termed the Paramilitary Force, by which is meant all defense and quasi-defense organizations which are not part of the regular armed force. It involves about a dozen separate military organizations and at least 1.6 million persons.¹

Of the three traditional divisions of the Vietnamese communist military—the regulars, the regionals and the locals—the last two have traveled over the years under a nearly endless number of names and descriptions. Nor has there ever been standardization of terminology applied to the Paramilitary Force. The result has been enormous confusion among outside observers² and among even those within Vietnam. Frequently the same institution is referred to by two or three different names. PAVN officials and the Hanoi press often employ casual or informal terms to identify paramilitary organizations. The confusion is further compounded by translation into English, with inconsistent and even contradictory renderings not only by foreigners, but by official Hanoi translators.

In examining the paramilitary structure, it is best to begin not with its organizational nomenclature but its affective character. General Giap, writing shortly after the end of the Viet Minh War, distinguished the sense of the regulars from the paramilitary:

The situation in the country has now changed. The Revolution has shifted to a new stage. Our People's army is becoming a modern regular army. If a new war breaks out it will be a modern war. But for us it will also be, in nature, a people's war, and the war-time tasks will be those of all the people. Consequently the Militia, far from playing only a minor part, will be

most important. The Militia will be a strategic force, and guerilla war a strategic problem. In the future as in the past the armed forces will include not only the regular, modern army, but the armed and semi-armed forces which coordinate with the army in military operations. . . .

Parallel to building a permanent army, a great military reserve force must be built to organize and educate the masses in military matters. Everyone must be prepared to defend the Fatherland . . .

Tasks of the Self Defense units are a) to replenish the permanent army; b) to maintain security and protect production; c) to serve the front lines and conduct guerrilla warfare in war-time . . .

After restoration of peace [end of Viet Minh war] there appeared in the military service a tendency to belittle the Militia, to regard its members only as regular army replacements. This deviation has now been rectified and the situation improved . . .³

PAVN Commander in Chief General Van Tien Dung provides a more recent, updated explanation of the Paramilitary Force:

The new battle posture for fighting a people's war to defend our homeland consists of a balanced armed force with three categories of troops distributed nationally. We have both in-place (i.e., static) and mobile forces; both modern regular people's forces and large mass armed forces; we have both regular forces and a powerful reserve force.

The Regular Force is composed of an ever more modernized armed service—infantry, air force, navy and anti-aircraft forces—together with necessary support branches, making it highly mobile on all battlefields, able to fight independently or in coordination with other branches and services, capable of meeting an enemy of any magnitude under all conditions, on land, sea or air. The Regular Force is the main punch in a conventional war . . .

The Regional force, now larger than before, is found in all localities from district to province in conformity with local need, tasks and overall conditions. Some Regional Force elements have been supplied with rather modern weapons and equipment. This Force serves as the hard core of people's war fought locally. It fights and produces at the same time. In battle it takes the initiative and is ever ready to wipe out or wear down the enemy

or create battlefield conditions that permit the Regular Force, in coordination with the Regional Force, to strike major blows at the enemy.

The Militia and Self Defense Force are now becoming more and more extensive throughout the country . . . This mass armed force is the sharp tool of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the strong bastion at the grassroots level of the all-people national defense and people's war at the local level. It can both engage in economic production and fight, can battle the enemy at any time or place, annihilating or wearing him down, and can protect lives and property by helping maintain political security and social order.⁴

General Dung's reference to the "three elements of national defense"—the Regular Force, the Regional Force and (considered as one) the Militia and Self-Defense Force—is a usage now hoary with tradition. The triad arrangement was employed in the Viet Minh War and again by the NLF's Liberation Army in the South during the Vietnam War. The southern forces consisted of the Full Military Force or Main Force (the Americans often called them the "hard hats" because of the fiber-board helmets worn) and the Paramilitary Force or Guerrilla Force, which in turn was of two types, the Territorial or Regional Guerrillas and the Local Guerrillas. The three-element (or four-element to be precise) usage continues today even though clearly the Vietnamese soldier functions now either as regular military or paramilitary.⁵

The Paramilitary Force troops have four general missions:

To defend their local areas in time of war, presenting themselves as a credible military force. In this, they either can be dug in as a static force, or mobile and fluid as guerrillas traditionally are. Local defensive measures normally are "to impede and delay the enemy advancing through the area; fighting spies and commandoes at all times (i.e., war and peacetime), and putting down rebellions."⁶

To support PAVN regulars by assuming specific combat duties in systematic and coordinated fashion; planning for such coordinated action is to be done in advance of actual war.

To maintain both local political security (vs. counterrevolutionaries) and local law and order.

To engage in economic production, primarily either food production (rice, vegetables) or construction (road building, water conservancy projects). Agit-prop sloganizing often asserts, "the fundamental role of the Militia is economic production and protection of production."⁷

The distinguishing characteristics between regionals and militia/self-defense are geographic and temporal, that is, where they are assigned and with what mobility, and how much of their time is devoted to military affairs. These differences grew out of the earlier guerrilla system that was their forebear. It was composed of the regional (or territorial) guerrilla who was mobile and operated over a wide range of territory, usually a province, under the command of the provincial Party Central Committee; and the local (or village) guerrilla who was static, part-time, under the command of the village chief who reported to the District Party office, and entirely defensive serving only his village.

The Regional Force today is geographically bounded, that is, its units are responsible for assisting only in the defense of their respective provinces. Units commonly are located in the province capitals and district towns. The most common reference to them is as provincial local troops and district local troops. With some exceptions, they are organized on the basis of one regiment per province, although Regional Force divisions are stationed in some of the provinces adjacent to China. The basic operational unit is the Regional Force company. It is expected to operate as a more or less self-contained military entity, an in-place home guard helping to defend its own territory. Although full-time, it has production duties, mostly raising rice, vegetables and livestock.

The Militia/Self Defense-Force (formally known as the People's Militia and the People's Self-Defense Force) is found mainly in the North. It consists of a large variety of "troops" such as militia troops, mobile militia troops, self-defense troops, village troops and, in the South, Youth Assault troops and Armed Youth Assault troops. These are part-time, organized by company, usually stationed in village or urban centers. However, their structure and function vary so greatly it is difficult to generalize about them. In size they appear to average about 2,000 individuals per district. The Militia/Self-Defense Force consists of three functional components: the combat force (which can be either static

or mobile), the combat support force (for logistic needs) and what is called the village protection platoon (police function).

At the village level these units are small, a dozen persons or so forming a squad, or perhaps four times that number as a platoon, often termed a detachment. Here the division is between static and mobile. The static detachments mainly draw guard duty, or do foot patrolling through the village. The mobile detachments represent a higher level of technology, using vehicles for road patrolling and reconnaissance. Some are specialized units with communications and engineering duties; others are what are called "fire power" detachments, units with artillery, anti-aircraft weapons (usually 37mm) and mortars.

A special paramilitary variant is the Centralized Militia and Centralized Self-Defense Force which appears to be found exclusively in the mountains along the China border and in the highlands of the South, apparently composed entirely of ethnic minority highlanders, commonly the Montagnards. The term "centralized" as applied to these units means centrally supervised, that is, by Hanoi.

An essential difference between the Militia and Self-Defense Force seems to be (again with some exceptions) geographic; the Militia being rural and the Self-Defense Force urban or town. Both types are organized around economic institutions or work place; for instance, a Militia platoon will comprise members of an agricultural commune while a Self-Defense Force platoon will be made up of workers from a hydroelectric station. Both might man 37mm AAA guns or help maintain local security. These two lower level Paramilitary Forces are regarded as manpower pools to be tapped in time of war by the Regional Force, just as the Regional Force represents a potential recruiting pool for the Regular Forces.

In the late 1970s, the Paramilitary Force was put back into the guerrilla business, which many in and out of PAVN regarded as anachronistic. Apparently this was a direct result of the 1979 Chinese incursion. Earlier, after the end of the Vietnam War, a faction within the High Command had argued that PAVN should retain guerrilla war capability, at least in facing China. But proponents were not able to develop this force, nor did they allocate the necessary personnel and equipment until after the Chinese attack.

The High Command in 1978–79 created a new “super paramilitary force” called the People’s Guerrilla Force (sometimes the Militia Guerrilla Force or sometimes simply China border village troops), which is described as “units specialized in combat found in the villages along the northern border and seacoast, on islands, and in the large cities in the South.”⁸ These clearly are “regionals” rather than “locals,” but, more importantly, they are authentic “guerrillas.” This is particularly true with respect to those units stationed near China. Central Committee Directive 202, 19 October 1979, ordered the creation of special 300-person battalions of “guerrilla militia” to be equipped with first class modern weapons. It was, in effect, a return of the “super guerrilla” of the 1968–70 period of the Vietnam War. It also was something of a victory for the *dau tranh* advocates within PAVN.

The first reference the author can find to guerrilla units specifically designed to oppose the Chinese comes in mid-1978 from Quang Ninh province refugees. Arriving in Thai camps, they reported that virtually all villagers between the ages of 16 and 45 in Hoang Bo district were required to join the new organization, and told to prepare themselves to fight a guerrilla war against the Chinese. The units were trained by regular PAVN officers who had fought in the South. They were well equipped with modern infantry weapons and generously supplied with demolition materials. These refugees left the province before the Chinese incursion so that the success of the program is not known. Nor can we be certain that formation of this organization indicates that Hanoi anticipated the Chinese invasion, since it quite possibly could have come about as a result of factional infighting at the High Command level.

The People’s or Militia Guerrilla Force is organized by company, and is better armed and more mobile than the ordinary Militia/Self-Defense troops. Its peacetime mission appears to be to maintain security and social order locally—it is in the village but not of the village, as are the Self-Defense troops—especially in the South. In the event of invasion, it impedes enemy advance with roadblocks, booby traps, “tiger traps,” and similar static defense measures. Most of the Militia Guerrilla units do not have production duties, while other Militia and Self-Defense Forces do.

Special military needs exist at the coast and among the many

clusters of islands and rock outcroppings along it. For this reason, special types of militia and self-defense forces have been created. The Coastal Militia, as it is called, does surveillance work in peacetime and fends off or slows down enemy amphibious landing in time of war. The coastal militia is stationed both along the coastal mainland and on the nearly numberless islands (many of them otherwise unoccupied) strung along Vietnam's 3,000 kilometer coastline. At sea are elements of the Marine Self-Defense Force which, under Vietnam Navy guidance, acts as a naval reserve doing coastal patrol work in peacetime and combat in time of war. It is composed largely of Vietnamese fishermen manning their own vessels.

The command structure of the Regional Force (and this may also apply to the Guerrilla Force) is the regiment, with headquarters at the province capital, reporting to PAVN corps headquarters. It is commanded by a PAVN colonel or senior colonel and has a staff of about twelve. Most of the officers are from the province and know the area well; their assignments to the Regional Force, out of PAVN, usually are for the remainder of their careers. The command structure for the Militia-Self-Defense Force is a district-level headquarters commanded by a PAVN senior captain or major with a staff of about ten PAVN officers, usually overage PAVN supernumeraries.

The Militia-Self-Defense Force is equipped with light-infantry weapons, but (with some exceptions) no artillery and very little transportation of any sort. Recruitment is local, and all able-bodied males, aged sixteen to fifty, with no other military service responsibilities are expected to join; women are encouraged to enlist but their participation is voluntary.

In this age of warfare, conducted with massive firepower and lightninglike mobility, the military significance of most of the Paramilitary Force, particularly the Militia-Self-Defense Force, is highly questionable. It is important, however, in terms of psychological commitment to the cause.

In the South, where distrust of Hanoi still runs high, a different type of paramilitary force is in place. Its major element is the Armed Youth Assault Force (AYAF). As an organizational entity, then known as the Youth Assault Force (YAF), it existed in the NLF's "liberated areas" during the Vietnam War years,

apparently as early as 1972. Since the end of the war, the paramilitary role in the South has been filled by the AYAF, but that may be a temporary arrangement only, with the long-range plan calling for establishment of a paramilitary force similar to the one in the North.⁹

A backup for the AYAF in the South is the so-called village-troop system, composed of northerners (not southerners), found chiefly in southern cities (not villages). The structure is relatively new, dating only from late 1981, and appears to be the beginning of an effort to relieve PAVN regulars in the South of their internal security responsibilities without turning authority over to southerners.

In creating a paramilitary force in the South, Hanoi's main problem was how to tap the South's manpower pool to fill local military needs without creating a potentially counterrevolutionary army. The essential answer has been to utilize only the young. Recruitment, therefore, is only among the very young, the uncontaminated, who were young children under the GVN, presumably with little memory of or loyalty for the previous regime. Standards are set to ensure political purity, and there is heavy indoctrination to inculcate what is called "an assault mentality" and to meet the "Three Defense-of-the-Fatherland Obligations"—to perform productive labor, to improve one's technical skill and knowledge, and to establish one's political reliability.

In its present postwar form, the AYAF is largely the creation of Vo Van Kiet, who, in the summer of 1975, reconstituted the YAF into the AYAF and gave it new missions and importance. Its numbers increased rapidly and by December 1976 totaled more than 50,000. Today the AYAF's strength is conservatively estimated at 1.5 million persons and may be 2 million. In either case these figures are somewhat misleading since the AYAF is of two types, full-time and part-time.

Initial AYAF duties involved internal security—maintaining public order and suppressing counterrevolutionary elements in the villages. Later some units took on the retraining of the former PLAF's regional and territorial guerrilla units into unarmed militia. Then economic duties were added. Finally a spin-off element was created, the Assault Youth Combat Force (AYCF), units of which went to the war in Kampuchea.

Although the AYAF is organized along military lines—from platoon up to brigade (of 4,000) and commanded by retired PAVN officers—the force appears to be more Party than military. Units at various echelons are under the direct supervision of the appropriate local Party committees and appear to be extensions of local Party structure. The chain of command to Hanoi, such as it is, apparently is not to the Ministry of Defense but directly to Party headquarters.

Originally the AYAF had something of an elite quality about it. The bulk of its members were young true believers from the former Viet Cong “liberated area.” Recruitment out of the former GVN society was selective. By the late 1970s, however, much of the *esprit* was lost. By the 1980s, while the Youth Combat Force still had a certain élan, the ordinary Youth Assault Force had largely degenerated into a dumping ground for restive urban youths. “Saigon cowboys,” or southern youths who run afoul of the law or the security *apparat*, are given a choice of jail or AYAF duty in the remote backcountry to clear land and lay out New Economic Zone (NEZ) villages. Such areas are proclaimed to be “the best environment for forging the younger generation,” as one editorial expressed it. In many instances service in the Youth Assault brigades is the price a youth must pay for getting a higher education. He signs what is called an “economy-building fixed-time labor contract” for one to five years’ labor in exchange for schooling.

The AYCF, created out of the AYAF in 1978, appears to be a true paramilitary force. It is under the “command” of Nguyen Van De, Secretary General of the Ho Chi Minh Youth Union. The three months of military training given recruits is fairly impressive, including use of infantry weapons up to 82mm mortars, lectures on urban warfare tactics and defense of fixed installations, field exercises along the coast against amphibious landings, and, of course, a good deal of political indoctrination. Joining the AYCF exempts the youth from military conscription.

In the 1980s many AYCF companies were sent to Kampuchea, where they served as bearers, ran warehouses and storage yards, and, increasingly, engaged in combat. Reportedly they performed well under fire, somewhat to the surprise of their PAVN commanders. Refugees in Thai camps say that common

deployment of AYCF units during a military operation is to “sandwich” them between PAVN recruit units a kilometer ahead as the front line, and PAVN regulars a kilometer behind (to ensure that no one cuts and runs).

Eventually, it appears, the regime will extend the northern paramilitary system to the South and abolish the AYAF and the AYCF. Military Region 9 in early 1982 began formation of the orthodox Military/Self-Defense structure, apparently as an experiment under Maj. Gen. Ho Ba Phuc who reported that, as of March that year, an unnamed province in his region had militia in 65 percent of its villages (headquartered at district) and its self-defense force (headquartered at province) was at 48 percent strength.

Postwar Reorganization

At the end of the Vietnam War, PAVN was in far worse condition than was generally believed abroad, and entered the postwar world enormously debilitated and badly in need of rebuilding and reorganization. This task of reconstitution was made doubly difficult because the High Command had no clear idea of what sort of military force PAVN ought to become. High Command's initial estimates and expectations proved entirely wrong. Within a few months after the end of hostilities, an intensive reorganizational effort was begun which continues to this day. Although it has never ceased, the reorganization has tended to proceed in waves of intensity. The first crescendo of activity came in late 1975, the second in the summer of 1978, and the third in early 1982. During these peak periods the Hanoi press, especially the military press, carried a flood of reports daily on “transformation, creation, extension (enlargement)” of PAVN units and the training and retraining of PAVN personnel.

The truly ambitious full-scale overhaul of PAVN—what is termed the Great Campaign—was launched in 1978 as a five-year plan with five objectives: (1) to increase the individual soldier's sense of responsibility, discipline, dedication, and attitude of solidarity; (2) to increase individual soldier's mastery of his weapons, equipment, and vehicles and to encourage more frugal expenditure of fuel, supplies, and materiel; (3) to improve PAVN leadership and command abilities, particularly at the basic unit

level; (4) to improve military-civilian relations and heighten international solidarity; and (5) to improve the material-spiritual life of soldiers.¹⁰

Probably the most important part of the five-year plan was the restructuring of the officer corps. It was launched into its planning stage in 1978 and finally got off the drafting board in 1981 when the National Assembly approved a four-part statute titled "Army Officer's Service Law."¹¹ It was the first such comprehensive overhaul of the military leadership since Decree 306 of 20 June 1958 that "regularized" Viet Minh War PAVN officers, that is, converted them from guerrilla leaders to modern army officers.

The new SRV Service Law—implemented by Council of Ministers Order 564/QP, dated 29 April 1982—did the following: (1) it established systematic new criteria for the selection and training of officers; (2) it defined PAVN officers' rights and military obligations; (3) it overhauled, upgraded, and formally instituted a new PAVN reserve officer system; and (4) it established new regulations concerning officer promotion (and time in grade),¹² assignment, and ranking systems. Accompanying the basic law were other Council of Ministers directives that dealt with PAVN ranks, uniforms, insignia, and other trappings.

The broader meaning of the new law was that it codified what had long been fact; that is, it officially acknowledged the existence of military hierarchy in PAVN. Earlier, during the Viet Minh War, the stress on egalitarianism within PAVN was so strong as virtually to deny any hierarchy existed at all. This was manifested in many ways: by semantic usage (there were no officers and enlisted men, only cadres and combatants), by identical uniform for all, by absence of rank insignia, and by avoiding the use of rank and title in conversation. This attitude persisted to some extent throughout the Vietnam War.

The trend toward professionalism in the PAVN officer corps after the end of the war permitted the officers to come out of the closet, so to speak. There was a new assertiveness by victorious PAVN officers and enlisted men alike. The officer corps came into its own, and panoply replaced the "Ho Chi Minh sandals" made of old automobile tires. The new directives stipulate colorful new unit insignia—bright red for infantry, sky blue for

air force and air defense force, purple for navy, green for border defense, and light gray for specialist technicians—in all twenty-five separate services, each with its own emblem. In other armies such gestures have proved to be the beginning of service *esprit de corps*, if not interservice rivalry.

A thirteen-rank officer system was clearly fixed and titles provided. There are new designations for navy flag rank, which previously carried general's titles (although apparently navy officers below flag rank continue to bear army ranks). Under the new regulations PAVN has five kinds of officers: line commanders, staff officers, political officers, administrative officers, and military police officers.

Officer duty is mandatory if required by the interests of the society, unlike other military systems, which may require military service but not military service as officers. In Vietnam the practice is to decide which type of individuals are needed as officers then notify them that they "have been selected to be trained as officers," as the new law states. There are five categories of such individuals: (1) enlisted men who are deemed officer material and sent to officer-training schools; (2) noncommissioned officers who are promoted directly (that is, battlefield commissions); (3) enlisted men, such as college graduates, holding specialized skills needed by the military (as officers they are no longer under the regulations permitting early discharge, as are enlisted men); (4) civilians in certain State and Party positions who receive direct, lateral transfer commissions into special slots that have been reserved for them within PAVN; and (5) reserve officers (that is, reserve officers called to active duty).

Article 31 of the new law dealing with officers' duties and rights is heavy on the former, light on the latter. Officers' duties are listed as:

1. To be absolutely loyal to the fatherland, the people and the SRV state, to uphold revolutionary vigilance, to fulfill well all assigned functions and tasks and to stand ready to fight, make sacrifices and firmly defend the Socialist Vietnamese fatherland;
2. To exemplarily observe the party's line and policies, state laws and military rules and regulations and to uphold the soldier's sense of discipline in their units;

3. To respect the laboring people's right to socialist collective mastery, to resolutely defend socialist property and the people's lives and property, to promote democracy and firmly maintain discipline in the army and to care for the spiritual and material life of soldiers in their units;
4. To regularly train in order to enhance their knowledge in the political, military, cultural, scientific, technical and professional fields as well as their ability to organize, command and manage troops, to improve their revolutionary ethics and to train themselves physically in order to fulfill their tasks well.¹³

Clearly one intent in the overhaul of the officer system was to ensure continued officer loyalty. Said the Hanoi daily, *Nhan Dan*:

Officers of PAVN are military cadres vested with the heaviest and most glorious duties. The regulations on specific benefits and obligations of officers are aimed at creating favorable conditions for them to be at ease in carrying out their work and fulfilling their assignments under all circumstances. . . .¹⁴

The second most significant aspect of the PAVN postwar overhaul is the reassertion of discipline among the troops. It has been characterized as an effort to improve performance but it also is aimed at insuring continued reliability of the armed forces into the next generation.

In official parlance what is involved here is "military inspection and control." Administrative responsibility is vested in the PAVN General Political Directorate which operates through its political officers down to the company level. Military control in practice becomes a combination of judicial activity (the domain of the Judge Advocate in the U.S. Army) and policing of PAVN from the inside (the Inspector General function). Activities of officers and enlisted men are monitored both for wrongdoing such as corruption, and to assure continued discipline, obedience to orders, and adherence to PAVN regulations and SRV laws. Military jurisdiction extends to civilians in matters that relate to PAVN or involve PAVN personnel.¹⁵

A new Military Code was issued in the postwar overhaul in the form of a series of regulations governing personal conduct and clearly designed to tighten discipline.

The regulations list punishments that may be meted out to enlisted men (in ascending order of severity): (1) censure, (2) restriction to camp (or refusal of permission to go ashore, in the case of naval personnel) on days off, (3) warning, (4) disciplinary detention of from one to ten days (not applied to female military personnel), (5) assignment of lesser position, (6) demotion, (7) discharge and (8) dismissal from military service.

Officers are not subjected to disciplinary detention as are noncommissioned officers and enlisted men. The seven punishments for officers (in ascending order of severity) are: (1) censure, (2) warning, (3) assignment of lesser position, (4) dismissal from position, (5) reduction in rank, (6) deprivation of officers' insignia, and (7) dismissal from military service.

The new regulations also establish commendations and "rewards," of which there are ten for enlisted men: (1) commendation for achievement; (2) awarding of keepsakes; (3) awarding of short leaves (one to ten days); (4) awarding of letter of commendation; (5) awarding of photograph taken under the unit flag; (6) awarding of certificate of merit; (7) promotion to next highest rank ahead of schedule; (8) awarding of designation of honor and insignia (Hero, Emulation Warrior, Determined-to-Win Warrior); (9) awarding of a medal; and (10) awarding of designation of Hero of the People's Armed Forces. For officers there are eight such commendations, the above ten minus numbers 3 and 5.

There is a nearly endless list of medals available to PAVN personnel since great emphasis is placed on that sort of honor. Among those noted in the press over the years are: Liberation Exploit Medal (1st, 2d, 3d, class); Ap Bac Warrior Medal; Brass Fortress Medal; Brave Destroyer of Armored Vehicles Medal; Brave Killer of Americans Medal; Brave Unit in the Destruction of Americans Medal; Gallant Destroyer of Aircraft Medal; Gallant Destroyer of Mechanized Vehicles Medal; Gallant Destroyer of M113 APC Medal; Brave Hero of the Ten Thousand Kilometer Hike Medal; Exemplary Transportation Member Medal; Four Excellent Qualities Comrade Medal; Glorious Youth Following Uncle Ho's Advice Medal; Heroic Puppet Killer Medal; Outstanding Emulator Medal; Three Good Qualities Medal; and Vanguard Youth Group Medal. Approximately 100,000 PAVN

officers and enlisted men receive medals and other commendations each year.¹⁶

PAVN pay has always been notoriously low, even for a poverty-stricken society such as communist Vietnam. POWs during the war told their interrogators the monthly salary of an enlisted man amounted to the price of a dozen bottles of beer. Pay was increased in the 1978 overhaul although it still remains below comparable income elsewhere in the society and has been undercut further by an inflation rate that in some periods has run as high as 100 percent a year.

Pay is based on rank, length of service, size of family, and honors and awards received. Monthly base pay for a private ranges from ₭ 7 (recruit) to ₭ 26 (after five years' service) plus a ₭ 30 rice ration (or a pound of rice per day). Base pay for noncommissioned officers: Corporal ₭ 56; Sergeant ₭ 66; Senior Sergeant ₭ 76.

Company-grade officers received from ₭ 70 to ₭ 100 a month, field-grade officers about double that, and general officers about double the field-grade officer salary. This is base pay. To it is added seniority pay (1 percent of base pay times years of service), family allowances, a 30 percent hardship service bonus (in Kampuchea), and a 10 percent cost-of-living bonus in the South.¹⁷

Equipment issued has been upgraded although it remains minimal by Western standards. The present standard annual issue for enlisted men and noncommissioned officers is two uniforms, two sets of underwear and stockings, and two pairs of shoes. Women are issued three meters of cloth per year from which to have uniforms tailored. The new K-82 uniform was modeled in photographs published by *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 4 April 1983. There are four separate uniforms for male and female officers—summer dress, winter dress, summer work, winter work—and sharp distinctions between officer and enlisted men. The new uniforms are to be phased in gradually and become mandatory in 1985. The new regulations specify dress for all general officers: "white long-sleeved shirt with stiff collar, tie and white gloves, black shoes to be worn with socks."

Other equipment issued includes: raincoat and ground cloth (sleeping mat) every eighteen months; hat and belt every three

years; blanket, mosquito net, and outer jacket every four years; and backpack every five years. These requirements often have not been met in the past because of shortages.¹⁸

Postwar restructuring of PAVN in terms of functions and military science is discussed in Chapters 11 and 14.

Notes—Chapter 5

1. For an authoritative explanation of these forces see Gen. Van Tien Dung, "On the Organization of PAVN," in *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, August 1978.
2. The High Command always considered that the French and later the Americans underestimated PAVN paramilitary forces. Wrote Gen. Thai (op. cit.): "The French High Command only took into consideration our independent companies and battalions and our newly established regiments. Consequently, they sent troops into our country thinking they could 'blitzkrieg' these troops and reestablish domination . . . The U.S. aggressors gave their attention only to the battalions, regiments and divisions of the Liberation Army and no doubt thought they would quickly destroy our main force units and (end) resistance . . . The Beijing expansionists also thought they would only have to deal with a number of our regiments, divisions and military corps . . . All the aggressions faced by us in recent wars have in fact been tied to the 'classical' concept of waging war with professional armies and failed to take measure of the combined strength of Vietnamese people's war . . ."
3. Vo Nguyen Giap, *On Guerrilla War*. U.S. Marine Corps Association, Quantico, VA, 1962.
4. Gen. Van Tien Dung, "On Local War," VNA, April 12, 1979. See also *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, August 1978.
5. To complicate matters further, there is additional division of paramilitary forces by function, which distinguishes between what is informally called "the protection force" and the "national defense mission force." The first is involved in ordinary local security activities such as guard work in communes and local enterprises and convoying trucks through rural areas; the second guards key installations such as electric power plants, protects against sabotage, and conducts local military recruiting drives. A Militia unit or a Self-Defense Force unit can be either a protection force or a national defense mission force.
6. Col. Le Manh, *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, August 1982.
7. Drawn from Gen. Dung, op. cit. See also "Training Militia and Self-Defense Forces for Combat Duty," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Sept. 19, 1982.
8. This People's Guerrilla Force is similar to earlier Militia/Self-Defense units except that it is full time and better supplied, equipped and trained. A variant appeared in early 1983, called the Coastal Militia and Self-Defense Force and was located in certain select "district fortresses" on the coast, mostly between Haiphong and the China border. The Coastal Militia/Self-Defense Force is built around economic enterprises

associated with the sea, such as fishing villages, seafood processing plants, or inland waterway transport services. Military duties appear to be strictly sea oriented, i.e., naval combat using torpedo boats and junk type vessels, laying and sweeping mines, sea rescue and transport of troops and supplies on an emergency basis. See Vu Hai Duong, "Coastal Militia and Self-Defense Forces in Coastal District Military Fortresses," Radio Hanoi, May 22, 1983.

9. For a discussion of the forerunner of the AYAF see the author's *Viet Cong*, Chapter 9, dealing with the Youth Liberation Association.

10. *Nhan Dan*, March 23, 1983.

11. The SRV National Assembly approved the law in December 1981. It was actually promulgated in January 1982 and finally put into effect when issued as a Council of Ministers Directive in April 1982. Text of the law was published in *Luat Hoc*, July–September 1982. Other relevant legal texts include Council of Ministers Decree 153/HDBT, Sept. 8, 1982, "Regulations on the PAVN Officer System," carried by VNA, Oct. 4, 1982, and Decree HDBT 74 dealing with uniforms, emblems and insignia promulgated on April 26, 1982, and described in *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Jan. 9, and Jan. 14, 1983. See also Radio Hanoi, Jan. 17, 1982.

12. The new law also speeds up the notoriously slow rate of promotion within PAVN. A second lieutenant now can expect to advance to senior colonel in 20 years (vs. a minimum of 30 years previously), a rate similar to that of armies elsewhere.

13. Law Text *op. cit.* For further discussion see, "On Rewards and Punishment," a column carried in *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, July 15, 1981, titled *Warrior Regulations (Chien Si Dieu Lenh)*. See also Sen. Col. Nguyen Dung, "Orders, Discipline and Professionalism in PAVN," in *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, April 1978.

14. *Nhan Dan*, Jan. 10, 1982.

15. Gen. Vo Bam, *op. cit.*

16. *Nhan Dan*, March 23, 1983.

17. Various methods can be used for determining Vietnam's exchange rate, none of them very satisfactory. For comparative purposes here PAVN pay can be thought of at the exchange rate of $\text{Đ}1.00 = \text{US}\1.00 , since this is about equal purchasing power. The actual legal exchange rate is about $\text{Đ}3.00 = \$1.00$.

18. *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, June 10, 1982.

SECTION III

Party, Ideology and Leadership



National
level



Intermediate
level



Basic
level



Vietnamese Communist Party

Government

Government

Mass Organizations: (VN Fatherland Front, VN Confederation of Trade Unions, Women's, Youth, Students, intellectuals organizations (in South: liberation associations); *van hoi* groups).

Vietnamese Power Structure

CHAPTER 6

Party Within PAVN

Within the People's Army of Vietnam is, as there always has been, the Party. Known by various names over the years,¹ the Vietnamese Communist Party inside PAVN is the steel rod in a ferro-concrete building, the ever-present goading conscience, an eternal looming specter:

The history of the People's Army of Vietnam is the history of the armed struggle of the vanguard party of the Vietnamese working class, the Indochinese Communist Party of the past, the Vietnam Lao Dong Party of the present. The Party, correctly and ably applying the military line of Marxist-Leninist theory, has led the people in their fight for independence. . . . The source of our Army's strength first and foremost is the leadership of the Party. Without Party leadership our Army would not have accomplished anything. . . . During its period of birth, in war, and during the time the Army has come of age, strengthened Party leadership has always been the question of prime importance and the determinative factor. . . .²

This association—the integrated, symbiotic relation of military to Party—is the single most important statement to be made about PAVN.³

In day-to-day activity the close embrace presents both advantage and disadvantage for the generals who run PAVN. It gives them great influence at the center but sometimes forces them to inhibit (or deny) themselves in pursuing policies that are best for the armed forces. Increasingly in postwar years the relationship has put severe strain on the High Command as needs of the military service challenge wishes of the Politburo. Factionalism, the curse of all Sinic systems, also perpetually nags PAVN leadership and the Party *apparatus* within PAVN.

Yet, as far as is known, over the years few truly serious tensions have arisen between Party and military. In fact, the two have worked together more harmoniously than have partners in similar marriages in either China or the USSR.

The relationship's halcyon days were in the first decade of PAVN's existence, when the world was new and challenge was easily stated. Indochina patriots faced a highly visible, utterly hated enemy; and the single goal—to expel the French—that united all was something each could understand and approve. The Party led the cause because it seemed to possess a natural superiority. Young Viet Minh recruits, mostly from the villages, willingly deferred to the well-traveled, more experienced, better educated Party cadres who understood the complicated relationship of war to politics and always seemed to know what to do.

Much of the certitude (of Party members) and deference (by the military) now has evaporated. No longer is there unquestioned acceptance by PAVN rank and file of the Party's omnipotence. Postwar blunders have revealed feet of clay. Recently the Party has moved to rejuvenate itself within PAVN and labors mightily to restore itself to its previously unchallenged position. At this writing the effort continues.

Party and Militarism

Lenin, it is said, had a mortal fear that the Russian Revolution, as the French Revolution before it, would be captured by its own military and Bolshevik power in Russia would be lost to some Red Napoleon. Apprehension was communicated to early Bolshevik leaders with the slogan: The Party Controls the Gun. The fear became pathological in the 1930s when Stalin executed virtually the entire senior officer corps of the Red Army.

Party attitude never reached such proportions in Vietnam, but certain anxieties concerning the military did develop and persist. One of the fears to emerge early was of inadvertently losing control over the revolution because of rapid expansion in the size of the armed force, fear that Party personnel would be swallowed up by a much larger revolutionary movement. It was a fear that pitted ambition against destiny. The Party wanted and needed a large armed force, possible only through a united front. Creating a successful united front army, however, meant build-

ing a force in which the Party steadily grew proportionally smaller and its hold increasingly more tenuous. That was the dilemma: risk in exchange for prowess. Ho Chi Minh—usually on the down side of caution, although sometimes he boldly broke his own rules—managed, with razzle-dazzle political infighting and skilled organizational legerdemain, to achieve size and also to retain control. It was forever a delicate and uncertain balancing act, however, and again and again Party leaders were locked in private debate over exactly how much premium should be placed on united front military actions, how much latitude should be granted the non-Party military figures. Even when the correct equation was established, time and circumstance would alter it. Hence, the issue never could be resolved with finality.

The one immutable principle was that the Party would do everything possible to control the military's command structure. This determination to keep a tight grip, even in the early days, was described in a much later Party history:

During the first years of the Revolution, in keeping with the need and the revolutionary situation and tasks, especially during the 1930–31 movements of which the Nghe-Tinh Soviet was the pinnacle, the Party organized self-defense units of workers and farmers. In organizing them, the Party immediately established their working class nature; it also issued regulations concerning command and leadership systems to be employed. In establishing the system of unit commanders and deputy commanders, the Party stipulated that all units from squad level up must have a Communist Party representative on the command.⁴

The author then quotes an early directive (undated but circa mid-1930s) as saying:

Unit commanders and Party representatives must collaborate in commanding the unit. In their daily actions they must obey their Party organization. In their general military activities they must obey the next higher self-defense echelon and the corresponding military committee of the Party.⁵

The danger, to an extent, remains today in the form of the military capturing the Party, not via *coup d'état* but by permeation, almost inadvertently. Since the end of the Vietnam War the Party has been increasingly “militarized.” Ever greater numbers

of its new members are being drawn from the armed forces. In the 1975–82 period, six out of every ten new members recruited came out of PAVN ranks.⁶ It appears this has been deliberate because quotas for Party recruiting within PAVN are set for each military region and each military unit. Emphasis is not simply on numbers, however, for there are both “qualitative” and “quantitative” norms to be met in filling these quotas.⁷

Another early Party fear, running like a musical counterpoint through doctrinal statements, was that the military and the military-minded in the Party would precipitate premature action. It was a question of fixing *thoi co* (the proper moment), and it does seem that in policy debates PAVN representatives frequently were on the side of action sooner rather than later.

This apprehension has instilled an implacable conviction among Politburo members and other top figures in Hanoi that the “Party is in command” always. Over and over, in public statements by generals, in military text books, in lectures to military and civilian alike, the theme of primacy of the Party is reiterated:

The leadership of the Party over the armed forces should be:

1. Absolute. The Party does not share leadership with any other party, political organization or social class.
2. Direct. The Party's Central Committee controls PAVN without going through any intermediate level.
3. Complete. The Party is the guide in all matters, political, ideological, military combat, military organization building and logistics.⁸

Gen. Song Hao has written that there was only one serious challenge to Party domination of PAVN in the formative days:

Because of peculiar historical circumstances our Party entered into alliances with other classes to form a united national front or administration. However it never shared its leadership of the revolution with any other class. . . . In the complicated political situation during the first days of the August Revolution when our administration was still in its infancy, the reactionaries who called themselves Vietnamese Nationalist Party and who came on the heels of the Chiang Kai-Shek troops contrived to station their men in key positions in our Army hoping to turn it into a tool of counterrevolution. Others sought to take advantage of the situation and set up bourgeois-style rules according to which

our Army was to be taken away from Party leadership. The Party fought back resolutely against all schemes of sabotage on the part of the class enemies, all rightist views and unprincipled compromises, holding on firmly to its absolute leadership over the revolutionary armed forces.⁹

The fear of front-organization challenge always existed in the South with the National Liberation Front and its People's Liberation Armed Force. Hence, from the earliest days of the Vietnam War, the principle of "absolute leadership" of the military by the Party was asserted.

In an organizational matrix as large as Party-PAVN, there inevitably develop and persist various factional infights, policy conflicts, and internal leadership competition. Marxists call these contradictions. In noncommunist governing systems the contradiction often is military vs. civilian; in a Marxist system, it is military vs. Party. PAVN and the Party have been able, better than other Marxist systems, perhaps, to keep such contradictions under control and weighted on the Party's side. In sharp distinction to China, for instance, where for several years the PLA clearly dominated the Party in decision making, PAVN always has accepted its role and deferred to the Party.

Even so, divisions or contradictions have existed and have been tracked rather accurately by Hanoi watchers over the years. Probably the most important contentious issue or contradiction between PAVN and Party has stemmed from the problem of a divided command, the arrangement that often pitted the military commander against the unit political commissar. Throughout PAVN over the past forty years the problem sometimes has been resolved harmoniously; in some cases it persists as a sort of armed truce between the two sides, but it always is there hovering in the background.

A second contradiction (also discussed in Chapter 4) travels under the English expression *red vs. expert*. It manifests itself not only in Party-military personnel relations, but in devising military strategy and tactics; officer selection, promotion, and assignment; training programs; and establishing the ideal qualities of a soldier.

Another contradiction stems from the simple fact of social organization rivalry that exists always and everywhere, growing

out of separate senses of identity within subgroups and often manifesting itself as resentment against outsiders. This exists within PAVN as the service rivalry and unit *esprit de corps* found in all military organizations, also between PAVN and the Party. Only at the top, at the Politburo level, are individual figures able to span this contradiction—although even there we cannot be sure for we do not know what is in their hearts. Throughout PAVN, and especially at the officer level, there cannot help but be built-in resentment against the effects of the “Party system” within the armed forces. The Party controls the military leadership and the manpower pools from which future leaders are drawn. It is the sole agent with access to the benefits the system can offer. It is not monolithic, because of the factionalism, but that fact merely makes its intrusions somewhat more tolerable.

Finally there is what might be called the PAVN-Party vested-interest contradiction. It operates at a lower level and involves various transient policy decisions—often simply a matter of what is best for the Party is not best for PAVN and vice versa. These conflicts also are normal, found in all governing systems, and are not necessarily so destructive that they cause a breakdown. Two major examples exist in the postwar years. The first involves Vietnam's goals and purposes in Kampuchea with respect to PAVN. Is PAVN simply to pacify the country by destroying the resistance forces, or is it also to contribute to creating a viable government out of the PRK, by building a Khmer army, for instance? The second has to do with nonmilitary or “economic duty” by PAVN troops. Both of these policy questions are discussed below.

Control Mechanism

There is within PAVN a dual command-control system, one military (that is State) and one Party, more or less similar to the arrangement existing in all communist military organizations. These two elements should not be regarded as separate institutions somehow entwined but rather as a single integrated entity. For a mental image of the structure, picture a broad-based pyramid that is the armed forces, with the High Command at the top and the infantry company at the bottom. Inside this pyramid picture a second thinner pyramid, also running from apex to base:

it is the Party. The pyramid within a pyramid may be sliced horizontally into command levels; at each level, from infantry company to Ministry of Defense, there is an armed force command structure and, within it, a Party *apparat*. Party control of the military, thus, is not from the outside, like a puppet on a string, but from within. The Party control element, at each command level, is the respective Party Committee, augmented by the Party Political Officer (or Commissar, depending on rank). Thus there are two vertical hierarchies: (1) the Party Committee in each unit from military region down to battalion—it becomes the Party branch at battalion, the Party cell at platoon, and the Party activist in the squad;¹⁰ and (2) the Party Political Commissar at military region, corps, division, and regiment, and Political Officer down through the company. The Party Committee and lower *apparat* are concerned with policy, the Commissar–Political Officer with operations. The latter is the single most important Party figure in the entire armed forces structure.

The Party within the Vietnamese society operates under a quasi-legal document called the Party By-Laws or Party Statutes, which established the organizational structure: the Party Congress that elects the Party Central Committee, which in turn established the smaller Party Central Executive Committee (or Plenum Committee, as it is usually called) and the Political Bureau (Politburo) with its Secretariat and other attendant elements. Of these, only two are institutionally active: the Plenum Committee, which usually meets twice a year for about a week, and the permanent fifteen-member Politburo.

Article II of the Party By-Laws governs Party organization within PAVN and sets forth the separate structure to exist within the armed forces. Under the Plenum Committee–Politburo is the Central Military Party Committee (CMPC), which, because of overlapping Politburo membership, can be regarded as the ultimate power for all military matters, not only in the Party but in the nation.

The CMPC was reorganized following the Fifth Party Congress. It now consists of a Secretary (after General Giap, the post was filled by Le Duan), a First Deputy Secretary (C-in-C Gen. Van Tien Dung), two Deputy Secretaries (Sen. Gen. Chu Huy Man and Le Duc Tho), and six members.¹¹ This body is the high-

est institutional level for military policy determination. It receives directives and resolutions from the Politburo—Central Committee and also initiates its own, but its central function is to *refine*, that is, to restate the will of the Politburo—always set down in broad political terms—in the form of specific instructions for PAVN units.

Within the Ministry of Defense, at the very top, is a Party element that appears to be as authoritative, at least in operational terms, as the CMPC, although, again, because of dual membership the distinctions are unclear. It is called the Ministry of Defense Party Committee (MDPC) and is the highest-level Party “action” arm with respect to PAVN. The MDPC consists of a Secretary, currently Gen. Van Tien Dung; the PAVN Commander-in-Chief (also General Dung); the chiefs of the five Military General Directorates, and the senior political commissars of the major subordinate commands—the air force, navy, and four theaters of operations. It has a secretariat composed of a secretary-general, two deputies, and ten members. The entire membership of the MDPC is military.

The Party-PAVN connection, as noted, involves much overlap and many dual positions. For instance, General Dung is First Deputy Secretary of the CMPC and Secretary of the MDPC on the Party side, and Minister of Defense and PAVN Commander-in Chief on the State side. What is involved here—and this is true of the entire High Command–Politburo structure—is not a hierarchy or a chain of command, or even a superior-subordinate arrangement, so much as it is various sets of organizational boxes, occupied by the same few individuals, arranged in this fashion for the purpose of division of labor and, perhaps, monitoring or control.

Beneath the MDPC, and administered by it, are the descending levels of Party committees at the military theater, military region, corps, division, regiment, and battalion levels, and on down to the basic Party unit. At higher levels—division and above—the Party committees are sizable permanent institutions, each administering the committee structure below it and reporting to the committee above it. Much of their work consists of adapting and interpreting highly generalized Politburo and Central Committee directives into meaningful terms for each particular organiza-

tion. In this sense these committees are policy determiners. The major services, such as air force and navy, have at headquarters level a Command Party Committee with a secretariat; it is headed by the top political commissar for the service and includes the heads of all departments.

The basic units at the bottom—which means all of the lower-level Party elements with no policy-determining (or directive-interpreting) authority—form the arena for Party activity by rank-and-file members.

The Party chapter at the company level, called the *chi bo*, is run by an executive committee (*chi uy*) of two or three full-time officials, and is a collection of Party cells (*to dang*), each run by a cell leader (*to truong*). The Party chapter may have fifteen cells (forty-five members in each) but usually is smaller. It is administered by the Party committee at battalion level or its equivalent. The day-to-day activity of the Party chapter's cadres for the most part is given over to communicating the Party line, indoctrinating both Party and non-Party members within PAVN, running emulation drives and other motivational programs, recruiting and purging the membership, and generally ensuring the centrality of the Party in all military matters.

The Party *apparatus* in PAVN has at its command a variety of impressive institutional instruments to use to ensure loyalty to the Party and dedication to the cause, and to work against deviationism, personalism (selfishness), and other more common sins among soldiers. Essentially the effort is indoctrination, and while this can be divided into specific functions, it cannot be separated from general military training and education since by design it permeates all.

The three major activities that are more or less pure indoctrination are Information-Liaison Group work, chiefly political meetings and lectures; the *kiem thao* (self-criticism) session, something akin to confession in certain churches; and the emulation movement, the Stahkhavite technique borrowed from the USSR. Indoctrination work is pursued by the Party with high purpose and sometimes is seen as such by the individual soldier. Even at its best, however, it is a control and manipulation effort, a form of psychological warfare conducted by the Party against PAVN.

The political lecture is the primary instrument for Party in-

doctrination of PAVN troops. It is conducted by Information-Liaison Groups, teams of officers and enlisted men specially trained for the task and directly under the administration of the Party committee. It is based on an ancient institution and was formed in 1950. During the grimmest years of the Vietnam War, 1971–73, political lectures were held daily in all units, even those in combat. These were cut back after the war to the present two-hour lectures twice a week (usually on Tuesday and Friday afternoons) plus a one-hour “political notice” lecture on Wednesdays that is devoted to new Party resolutions, official pronouncements, and such. Officers meet for an additional two-hour lecture on Saturday. Attendance is mandatory for all. This is the Party’s “ideological mission” in its purest form. Le Duan has explained it thus:

When speaking of the ideological mission within the Army we are on the one hand speaking of revolutionary idealism, of judging the enemy correctly, of readiness to defend the Fatherland, of discipline and complying with orders, and on the other hand, we are speaking of understanding military theory, military science and the Party’s military lines. . . .¹²

The lectures, by the political officer, are divided more or less evenly between shoring up existing beliefs and behavioral patterns and providing persuasive explanations of new Party “lines.” The first of these has developed a special jargon, apparently the result of the political officer’s constant search for expressiveness. Virtues in official jargon are what is termed disciplinism, revolutionism (revolutionary will), and scientific political consciousness. Negative behavior includes subjectivism, conservatism, tendency to formalism, liberalism (tolerance of dissent), impetuosity, and sloth. Explaining the Party line involves what are called guiding concepts, viewpoints, and mottoes, that is, Party policy statements presented in easily understood fashion. The vice here, on the part of the lecturer, is sloganizing, the phenomenon not unknown elsewhere in which the matter at hand passes from the notes of the teacher to the notebook of the student without going through the mind of either.

Thematic material in all indoctrination sessions tends to be topical, whatever is of major concern to the leadership at the mo-

ment. For the past several years, it has been the China threat. The theme employed is that Vietnam is now at war with China—a war of “encroachment and occupation, a malicious, multifaceted war of sabotage,” but nevertheless, a war:

This war is completely different from the air and naval war waged by the U.S. imperialists against North Vietnam in past years. This is a war of sabotage against various [social] sectors: the economy, the armed forces, politics, culture, and social attitudes. . . . It is an extremely malicious war of sabotage designed to weaken us in order eventually to topple and annex our country. . . . It involves sabotaging the economy and everyday life, intensifying psychological warfare and espionage as well as continuously launching military attacks in the hills and important positions along the northern border . . . acts of armed encroachment and occupation using medium and small scale forces, primarily infantry forces coordinated as necessary with artillery, tanks and air power.¹³

The *kiem thao*, or self-criticism, technique of Party control has no counterpart in noncommunist armies. The party statutes call for “criticism and self-criticism from below to expose and eliminate shortcomings in work and to fight against a show of complacent well-being.”¹⁴ Psychologically rooted in group dynamics, this institution seeks to harness social pressure, the most powerful force in any society. Within PAVN it appears to be somewhat less substantive in content than in the Party as a whole. Concern seems to be less with attempting either to inculcate a set of specific ideas and doctrinal truths or to manipulate behavior, than with attempting to “engage” the individual, to draw him into commitment to the system and hold him there. Thus the great enemy in *kiem thao* sessions is not counterrevolutionary tendencies, as one might assume, but simple indifference, the inadvertent deviation into vagueness of thought.

The *kiem thao* weekly session usually lasts about two hours and is to include both negative and constructive criticism by the individual about himself, his peers, and his superiors. As such it is an effective means of assuring Party centrality, if nothing else, since it is sponsored by the Party. It permits leadership insights into PAVN morale and can signal present or potential problems; therefore, it is a good device for monitoring military spirit. It also

acts as a release valve—as does any rap session—reducing pressure in circumstances when no other remedy is available. And it has the cathartic effect of psychological purge, as religious leaders have known for two thousand years. The chief difficulty with *kiem thao* probably is to keep it truly critical. Outspoken criticism at the personal level is not considered proper in traditional Vietnam. Further, in small tightly knit military units in which one's life may depend on the action of another, there naturally is reluctance to alienate fellow soldiers.¹⁵

The emulation campaign is another Party control mechanism used in PAVN and the Vietnamese society at large that has no counterpart in noncommunist systems. The closest comparison probably would be to a major Madison Avenue media blitz advertising campaign. As an institution, the emulation movement is a vast enterprise, requiring the services of thousands of cadres and expending millions of man-hours of labor. Unlike the *kiem thao*, which chiefly involves Party members, the emulation movement involves everyone.

Most campaigns are short-run mobilization efforts, although some are semipermanent, having been in existence for a decade or more. Each is designed to serve a specific purpose: to increase agricultural or industrial production, to raise funds or to increase frugality (among the general population), to heighten vigilance against spies and counterrevolutionaries, to reduce logistics expenditure, to improve weapon and vehicle maintenance, or to increase a sense of international solidarity. Within PAVN, the emulation movement is “an essential means of advancing the Revolution,” which in practice means increasing unit solidarity, increasing individual soldier sense of discipline, and improving military-civilian relations.

Most campaigns have resounding titles: Act in Accordance with Orders Emulation Movement, Strengthen Revolutionary Discipline Emulation Movement, Develop Good Qualities and Increase Fighting Strength Emulation Movement. These do not simply involve moral exhortation. Quotas and other means of measuring contributions are established. There are “emulation congresses,” awards, medals, and honors. The soldier, and especially the officer, learns quickly that one of the fastest routes

to promotion, or at least enhancement of status, is to achieve some remarkable record in an emulation campaign.

Another form of control of PAVN, among Party members in PAVN, is through Party membership itself—which can be granted, denied, suspended, or removed permanently. Membership in the Party almost automatically means at least some career success for a soldier, just as expulsion is the certain road to career oblivion.

What amounts to a permanent Party purge has been going on in the armed forces for the past decade. It is an annual weeding out of Party members in PAVN; it averages about 1 percent of the total membership annually although in some units it can run as high as 6 percent in a single year.¹⁶

The most extensive purge of PAVN Party members came shortly after the end of the Vietnam War, with the expulsion or retirement of ethnic Chinese from the Party and, in many instances, from PAVN. This purge, which extended to the entire Party, was launched at the Fourth Party Congress in 1976 and included not only ethnic Chinese¹⁷ but apparently Montagnards as well. Three Montagnard generals—Chu Van Tan and Le Hien Mai, both Nungs; and Le Quang Ba, a Tay—were transferred from line officer to less-sensitive staff positions; the reasons for the transfers were never clear and the matter remains somewhat ambiguous. The purge system employed, in and out of the military, requires each Party member periodically to rate in secret all fellow members, using as criteria what are called “the four worthies”: moral character, revolutionary spirit, loyalty to Party, and personality (that is, selfless, modest, and such qualities). The rating sheets then go to the higher Party committee, where a decision is made and a purge list prepared. Purge efforts in 1979—after the Chinese attack—again were directed against ethnic Chinese Party members in the military. All PAVN officers were required to submit a report on themselves, listing the names and ethnic origin of their forebears three generations back, whether they spoke Chinese, their association with Chinese, whether they had lived in China, and any other Chinese connection.

At the same time as the purges are carried out, intensive recruitment drives seek to induce soldiers to join the Party. These have vastly increased the number of military members in recent

years. Previously Party membership was believed to make up about 5 percent of PAVN; now it is thought to be about 10 percent, and some observers believe it to be as high as 20 percent.

Finally, or ultimately, Party control of the armed forces is through direct and indirect command. In the first two decades of PAVN's life, such military direction as existed was entirely Party. There may have been competition within the united front structure between Party and non-Party but not within the fledgling armed forces. In the early years no one questioned either the centrality or the importance of Party activity within PAVN. Particularly during the formative years of political *dau tranh*, but even after the rise of armed *dau tranh*, what counted most in terms of effective leadership was not military knowledge but political acumen, organizational skill, and the ability to persuade and motivate. These attributes the Party cadres and members had—they had been well schooled—while most other officer candidates did not. In selecting officers (cadres) for the fledgling Viet Minh military force premium was placed on political skill.

The number of Party members within the army was very small and many command cadres were not Party members. The qualifications of cadres were, generally speaking, low but the task of the army at that time was the very complex and difficult task of uniting the people in fighting enemies, both foreign and domestic, so the Party gave authority to make all decisions in all units from the regimental level upwards to the Political Officer.¹⁸

As the Viet Minh War progressed and increased in magnitude and complexity, however, the need grew for leaders with military training and experience. The Party addressed this problem by searching for politically oriented Party people who had, or could quickly develop, the necessary military skills. The demands were so great and the Party manpower pool so small, however, that large numbers of officers with only military competence began filling PAVN officer ranks. The Party could not afford the implicit threat in this loss of direction, so in 1952 it introduced—borrowed from the USSR and the Chinese Communists—the institution of political commissar and political officer and the dual-command idea:

In 1952, when the war of resistance against the French entered a new stage of development and the scale of combat forces and qualifications of cadres improved somewhat, the Party decided to establish a system of commanders and political officers who would discharge their duties under the collective leadership of Party committees at various levels. Our army continues to implement this system of leadership and command.¹⁹

The new two-commander system, as it came to be called, was devised and implemented chiefly by Gen. Nguyen Chi Thanh. At first he installed political officers only at the platoon level, later at the company level. It was basic dogma at the time that even though there were two commanders there was no such thing as a “purely military” officer. Military training always sought to give a political orientation to military activity.

The end of the Viet Minh War brought geographic regroupment and then top-to-bottom reorganization of PAVN. The need was to hammer a semiguerrilla force into a new mold, into a semi-modern army. There were new requirements and new methods to be introduced, some of them highly complex. The two-commander system continued, but the “regularization” of PAVN brought many new officers into the system (they were called “Geneva cadres”) who tended to water down political purity. The rise of technological influences further exacerbated the situation and gave birth to the famous red vs. expert argument (discussed below). Those who could not adjust to the changes or who became superfluous were weeded out. The Party began to assert a centrality it never before had had to claim, not only in ideological matters but in selecting, assigning, and promoting personnel, in methods of training, and in military doctrine. It staked out a primacy it never has relinquished. Following is a typical expression of its position:

Officers of all ranks, whether Party members or not, must submit absolutely to Party leadership. Any tendency to disregard regional (i.e., intermediate level) Party committee leadership, or to extol individual power, or to use the collective leadership system to dodge individual responsibilities, is erroneous.²⁰

Much later the two-commander system officially was abolished,

although the institution of political commissars and political officers remains (discussed below).

Inevitably and understandably the new PAVN-Party relationship engendered conflicts. The wonder in retrospect is that the Party was able to handle things as well as it did. The conflicts during the several decades after the Viet Minh War—some are still in progress—involved a number of disparate issues: security controls over PAVN personnel by the Party and State, use of the military for economic and other nonmilitary tasks, criteria for selecting the generals and senior staff officers to do specific planning of grand strategy and direct major military campaigns in the field, the role of the paramilitary and its command authority within PAVN, separation of military services, and intermilitary relations (that is, officer-enlisted man and military-civilian). These tensions and conflicts exist in all military institutions and appear to have about the same significance in PAVN as they do elsewhere. There is one additional, more singular, conflict, having to do with the place of ideology within the military sphere, and it is far more significant and the one that probably will prove most influential in shaping the PAVN of the future. This is discussed below.

The entire *apparat* then is the mechanism by which the Party can monitor, guide, influence, and control the Vietnamese armed forces at all levels. The Party's central enunciated interest in this is twofold: ideological purity and military efficiency. Party cadres within the armed forces are charged with and held responsible for imbuing the proper ideological spirit as well as assuring good individual military performance. As with communist military organizations elsewhere, there is within PAVN growing doubt as to exactly how necessary the Party is; there are muted questions, even by loyal Party members, asking if the Party in PAVN is not a useless "fifth wheel on the cart."

What sort of balance can be struck in assessing the present Party-PAVN relationship? It seems certain that long-existing divergent interests—manifestations of differing goals, rationales, and viewpoints—will increase in the future. Conversely, there is no indication this trend will continue to the point of shattering the relationship. Party strategy used to handle the matter in the past undoubtedly will be employed in the future, that is, co-opt

the PAVN officer corps and dominate the military through sheer superiority plus internal control mechanisms. The danger that strategy faces in the future is less likely to be outright opposition by the military—say, a High Command *coup d'état*, although it is possible—than to be a subliminal challenge. It is not in the military's interest to confront the Party on broad abstract issues—although it will do so on specific ones—but it is in its interest to shape Party thinking. Because PAVN is enormous and ubiquitous, the potential for subliminal challenge is great, and it is that sort of challenge that is most difficult for the Party to counter. The prospect is for a reverse influence: PAVN, in effect, “militarizing” the Party, not so much as a conscious act but simply because of its overwhelming presence. This sociological struggle for influence, whether intended or not, will have profound effect on both institutions. It is probable that both will be altered in the process if the struggle continues for a decade or more.

Notes—Chapter 6

1. It was formed in Feb. 1930 as the Vietnam Communist Party. That name changed on Comintern orders later in the year to Indochinese Communist Party; in 1951 it became the Lao Dong(Worker's) Party; in 1976 it again became the Vietnamese Communist Party.
2. Col. Gen. Song Hao, "Party Leadership Over PAVN," *Hoc Tap*, no. 12, Dec. 1964. The same theme is expressed in *Ten Years of Fighting and Building the Vietnamese People's Army*, (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1965).
3. For a good detailed description of Party activities in PAVN, including recruiting, training, and indoctrination work, see Sen. Col. Vu Trong Canh, "Progress in Building the Party Organization in the Army," TCQDND, no. 3, May 1980. The organizational structure of the Party within PAVN is detailed in a lengthy three-part monograph titled the *Party Military Committee: Its Organization, Mission, Leadership Principles and Governing Regulations*, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 20, 21, and 22 June 1972 (issued by the PAVN General Political Directorate).
4. "Our Army's Revolutionary Nature," *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 17 Dec 1973.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Editorial, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 22 Nov. 1982.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Sen. Gen. Nguyen Chi Thanh, *Nhan Dan*, 17 Dec. 1959. See also "Party in Command," *Documents and Research Notes*, no. 34, May 1969.
9. Sen. Gen. Song Hao, "Party Leadership Over PAVN."
10. The Party also operates special urban elements that are exclusively PAVN about which little is known. In Ho Chi Minh City, for instance, there is what is called the Party Military Organization, which held a Congress in June 1983 attended by 200 delegates representing eleven Party organizations within PAVN, apparently military units stationed within the city. Radio Hanoi, 16 June 1983.
11. Generals Le Duc Anh, Nguyen Van Linh, Bui Phung, Nguyen Quyet, Le Trong Tan, and Hoang Van Thai.
12. Le Duan, "Party Work in PAVN," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Feb. 1982.
13. Bui Nguyen, "Political Work in Units Fighting Enemy Encroachment and Occupation," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Sept. 1982.
14. Party By-Laws, Article 3(a).
15. *Nhan Dan*, 2 Mar. 1983.
16. The device employed, beginning with the Fourth Party Congress in 1976, was issuance of new Party cards only to those the Party wished

to retain. The criteria were sharpened by the Fifth Party Congress, which said that Party members, in addition to being honest and competent, must: (a) actively contribute to raising consciousness of the Party among PAVN Party members; (b) be working to strengthen the Party at basic unit level; (c) be helping to reinvigorate the *kiem thao* institution; and (d) must practice the principle of democratic centralism. See Lt. Gen. Pham Ngoc Mau, "Review of Program to Issue Party Cards," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Feb. 1983.

17. Politburo member Hoang Van Hoan (who later defected to China) was the most prominent victim. Others included Ly Ban, Hanoi's top expert on Chinese foreign aid, and three previous Vietnamese ambassadors to Peking: Nguyen Trong Vinh, Ngo Minh Loan, and Ngo Thu-yen.

18. Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, *Nhan Dan*, 2 Mar. 1963.

19. Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, *Hoc Tap*, Jan. 1960.

20. Le Duc Tho, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 2 Feb. 1965.

CHAPTER 7

The Political Commissar

The Party *apparat* in PAVN, as noted earlier, is like a thin pyramid inside a broad-based pyramid. Party military policy is fixed by the CMPC and administered by the MDPC and the General Political Directorate through a descending echelon of central committees down to the basic unit. The *apparat* is somewhat abstract. What gives life and reality to the Party in PAVN is the individual cadre known either as the Political Commissar or the Political Officer.¹

The Political Commissar has no counterpart in noncommunist armies. Some of his functions are performed by the chaplain, the troop information and education officer, and the special services officer, but in PAVN he has far more authority and significance than have any of those others. Further, because communist armies are so politicized, while noncommunist armies avoid politics if they can, he represents an added dimension. Interviews with PAVN *hoi chanh*² and defectors during the Vietnam War provided a detailed picture of the Political Commissar in action. In PAVN and PLAF units in the South his duties were many and varied but chiefly involved political indoctrination, personal problem solving, and generally attending to his unit's morale. In short, he "mobilized the spirit." The Political Officer should not be thought of as a liberal figure, however, who serves the rights of the individual soldier. In fact, on principle he holds this to be wrong. His concern is with obligations of the individual soldier, not rights. The Political Officer's stock in trade is moral exhortation. However, he is a figure of concern, one who cares. Some Political Officers are extremely effective in keeping spirits high when life in the jungle becomes particularly arduous, or in restoring *esprit de corps* to dispirited troops after a battle is lost. The

Political Commissar personalizes the impersonal Party, is living breathing proof that the distant Politburo truly cares about each individual. A mystique has grown up around these figures, and some have become legends. The spirit of the Political Commissar, admittedly idealized, is captured in this poem by Diep Minh:

MY POLITICAL COMMISSAR

My Political Commissar is as old as my father
 And as gentle as my mother
 Yet he still looks young with his smiling eyes
 Only his hair is greying . . .
 He wears granddad glasses, yet he fights very well
 No exploit is possible without his participation
 He is the soul of my unit
 The lead-bird flying ahead of his men.
 We regard him as family
 For often he comes among us
 Swings in his hammock and chats with us for hours . . .
 When we felt low after a battle poorly fought
 He'd grasp our hands and say,
 "Do better in the next encounter . . ."
 He's leading us to reap more and more victories.³

The idea of the Political Commissar, developed earlier in the USSR and China, came naturally to the military structure the Party began building in the 1930s. With the change from political to armed *dau tranh*, the first commanders were, in effect, Political Commissars in the sense that the Party had no leaders whose chief concern was not politics and ideology, no leaders whose chief concern was military affairs. There was only one kind of commander, the totally politicized one. With the creation of the Viet Minh united front army, of which the Party was a part, the ordinary military commander, that is, the guerrilla-force leader, began to appear, and, with him, the need for a Party-control mechanism:

Between 1940 and 1945, facing the needs of the national liberation movement and armed *dau tranh*, and in preparation for the general uprising, the Party established the Bac Son guerrilla unit, the Vietnam Liberation Army propaganda unit, the Ba To guerrilla unit, the Nam Ky guerrilla army and so forth, which were the forerunners of the Vietnamese People's Army. As soon

as these armed organizations were established, and in the course of their development, the Party constantly developed the revolutionary nature and established the leadership system and command system of these units. The Party organized the system of Political Officers within the units of the Liberation Army.⁴

As the Viet Minh War grew, so did the need for commanders with high levels of military competency who knew strategy and tactics and could win battles. Compromises were made, including the one that ended the primacy of the political commander and the subservience of the military commander in all matters, even purely military ones. That arrangement had become unworkable, and the dual-command system was introduced. The Party ruled that, while authority within PAVN must not be vested in the hands of politically questionable (or nonpolitical) commanders, a military commander and a Political Commissar could share power, as was done in the USSR during World War II. Supreme authority at any level of command would rest with the respective Party committee under which two authorities—the military commander and the Political Commissar—both members of the committee, would share power “under the collective leadership of the committee,” as General Giap later explained it. He added:

Party leadership by Party committee assigning tasks to unit commander and the Political Commissar is a system that guarantees continued collective leadership. It provides the concentrated intellect of many individuals and assures close coordination in operations. It strengthens internal unity and assures uniform thought and action. It makes the struggle more powerful.⁵

The dual-command system had many flaws but managed to endure for nearly three decades. It generated a good deal of Party-military friction, bitter jurisdictional disputes, sharp personality clashes, and even occasional usurpation of authority. The nature of the antagonism was captured in this 1959 editorial in the army newspaper:

There are . . . bourgeois thinking “militarist” cadres who slight the Party committee and ignore the basic Party unit. They slight their political tasks and only reluctantly study doctrinal matters. They are proud and jingoistic and believe only in giving direct

orders and maintaining strict military discipline. They ignore their duty to the people. They prefer to serve with the regular military not the paramilitary. They seek to build an army that only engages in military activities. . . .⁶

When the atmosphere would become particularly thick, the Party would launch a new cadre-indoctrination campaign, usually labeled an emulation campaign. If necessary it would relieve or transfer individual military commanders or Political Commissars.

In the early 1960s the struggle for power between these two figures seesawed back and forth, but gradually, as the Vietnam War enlarged and intensified, it tilted toward the military commander. PAVN POWs and *hoi chanh*, discussing the command structure of their units (usually companies or battalions) in the 1966-68 period, indicated either that the military commander was unquestionably supreme or that an uneasy division of labor and authority had been worked out between the two in which the Political Commissar carefully kept out of combat decision making. There were occasional accounts of open confrontation between the two, including a few reliable reports of battlefield disputes in which the military commander shot his Political Commissar.

The lesson impressed on PAVN by the Vietnam War was that while it is possible theoretically to divide Party and military command function, and while it is even permissible in guerrilla war, it is not feasible in big-unit warfare. Others had learned it earlier. Soviet Red Army generals, those who survived Stalin's purges of the 1930s, were determined never again to permit the Party to have total life-and-death control over them. In the beleaguered days of World War II they extracted from Stalin, as a price for fighting the war, certain institutional changes that, in effect, became life insurance for them. PLA generals in China, it has been reliably reported, have agreed among themselves that there will be no repetition of the savage challenge they endured from the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution.

At the end of the Vietnam War there clearly was enormous pressure within PAVN to revise the role of the Political Commissar and end the dual-command structure, which many offi-

cers had concluded now was anachronistic. For a time the Party held fast. Experimentation began. Selected PAVN units were restructured in 1977 in such a way that the functions of the military commander and Political Commissar were combined in a single officer. The combination appeared at the time to work and was approved by the professional generals, but the General Political Directorate, which was able to prevent PAVN-wide implementation, opposed it. A second experiment was tried, apparently at the suggestion of the GPD, which was to shift much of the Political Commissar's authority back to the party committee. This had the earmarks of a political compromise and perhaps was a reasonable one for peacetime, when decision making does not have the stark life-and-death quality it has on the battlefield. Unofficially, authority steadily drifted to the military commander, a trend that accelerated after the start of the war in Kampuchea. Official policy, however, moved to the point at which command authority was divided, not between the military commander and the Political Commissar, but between the military commander and his Party committee. Directives to this effect were issued in 1979:

The commander must scrupulously comply with Party committee resolutions, orders and directives from higher levels, the guidance of the upper level command staff, political staff, service staff and technical staff. . . . When receiving an order or directive . . . the commander must study it thoroughly and, on the basis of what is necessary, propose to the Party committee on his level ways to implement it.

The relationship of the commander and the Party committee on his level is as the relation of a person being led is to the leadership level; as the organization a commander manages, commands and uses to implement orders is to the Party committee leadership. The Party committee provides leadership by means of resolutions and through scheduled and unscheduled decisions. It discusses and sets down guidelines, positions and actions but does not become involved in the command duties of the commander. The commander acts on the basis of Party committee resolutions, implementing them in a dynamic and creative way, and seeking Party committee opinions when necessary, but he does not lean on the Party committee, nor shirk the acceptance of responsibility.⁷

The chief difficulty encountered in assigning a role to the Party committee was that what had been a dual command now became a multiple command. Frequently Party committee would send instructions and orders directly to individual elements in the unit, that is, to a specific military, political, logistical, or technical officer, not to either the military commander or the Political Commissar. In effect, PAVN units were being run by a committee. Such was the system taken into Kampuchea, where it proved totally unworkable. There the military commander on the ground apparently assumed full military authority with or without official sanction.

Despite the difficulties, the Party pressed on with its dual-command concept—although in Hanoi it was not so called; rather it was termed the *system of leaders*—attempting to eliminate flaws. Finally refined, it was described thus:

A system of leaders is . . . a Party leadership system and an army command system existing at various levels. . . . The Party leadership system is collective leadership by the Party committee. . . . The army command system is the commander system. The commander is under the collective leadership of the Party committee.⁸

Under the impact of the Kampuchean war even this official arrangement, between the military commander and the Party committee, began to erode. The military commander, of course, had always been a member of his Party committee, and, if of strong personality, could dominate it. In practice it seldom was a case of one pitted against the other, rather it was a more subtle struggle for primacy. As the sense of primary authority continued to shift toward the military commander, Party directives also began to change tone. The military commander became less “under the authority” of the Party committee and more “responsible” to it:

The commander is responsible to the upper level, to the collective leadership on his level, and to his unit, for his military, political, rear service, technical and economic-task performances, for the progress of his unit, and for the material, spiritual, and cultural life of the cadres, soldiers, manual workers and other personnel under his authority.⁹

Eventually this arrangement, dividing command between military commander and the Party committee and shunting aside the Political Commissar, proved unfeasible. In 1980 it was supplanted by what is called the "one-man command system." All responsibility is now vested in the senior military commanding officer, responsible to higher authority, of course, including the Party committee, but with command authority entirely his. Gen. Hoang Van Thai wrote in the official military newspaper:

The Party Central Committee decided to implement the "one person in command" system within PAVN and has defined the role of the individual in charge with a view to giving the commander as much responsibility as possible. . . . This need arose from objective requirements of the military task, the development of the armed forces and the requirements of modern warfare (i.e., in Kampuchea).

It must be understood clearly that one person in command system is not contrary to the principle of the Party providing collective leadership of the Army. . . .

The purpose of implementing the one person in command system is to develop the responsibility of the military commander, increase the effectiveness of his troops, and administer the material-technical support better. The military commander is the person with the highest authority who bears the first and greatest responsibility. . . . One person in command will . . . correct the lack of system and of clearly defined responsibilities.

. . .¹⁰

The history of the new command system, briefly, appears to be that the initial decision to install it was made by the High Command in 1976; it was then tested for two years in select units, proved feasible, and so was ordered into place in 1978. Then came a counteroffensive by the Party ideologues, chiefly from the General Political Directorate, who fought the idea to a standstill for about two years, until late 1980 when it was ordered implemented armywide. The final official stamp of approval came in March 1982 when a Fifth Congress Resolution endorsed the "single commander" concept.

Under the new arrangement the Political Commissar as an institution is retained, but now he is entirely subordinate to the military commander:

Previously responsibility [in PAVN] . . . was shared by various command cadres in the unit. . . . Now responsibility for command and management of a unit is entrusted to only one person.

Formerly military cadres [and the military commander] were responsible for command and for troop management in military, logistical and technical matters. Political cadres, political officers and Political Commissars were in charge of Party work and political and ideological tasks. Now, responsibility for command in all respects—military, political, logistical and technical—is vested in the ranking commanding officer.¹¹

As part of the change the Party committee system, down to but not including the basic-level units, was replaced by the *military council*, described as the Party's policy implementer operating under a chain of command directly from the Politburo. What the new system attempts to do is to divide the political policy and military command functions more clearly. It does not diminish the principle of Party control over the military. It does appear to give the military commander greater freedom in initiating actions and greater latitude in day-to-day decision making while retaining his ultimate accountability to the Party for the actions taken or decisions made.

The initial reaction of the Political Officers within PAVN to the changes was the fear that they and the Party would lose prestige and status:

A number of cadres cannot help wonder whether one person can fulfill the responsibility formerly shared by various commanding cadres in a unit. Some comrades also fear that with the responsibility for commanding now entrusted to only one person, as provided for under the new system, individual authority will emerge, weakening the importance of the Party and political tasks.¹²

In promoting the system, every effort is made not to denigrate either the Political Officer or the political function within PAVN. A vast amount of material has been published to defend the single-commander idea. It all stresses four basic principles: that the Party endorses it fully and that it is to be supported by all Party members without reservation, and by all members of PAVN; that leadership in PAVN at each level remains with the

relevant Party committee—chapter and that the commander is responsible to it, at least *ex post facto*; that high-level directives, if anything, are now more important than they had been in the past and that greater attention must be paid to chain of command and correct understanding by each military commander of his relationship with superiors and subordinates; that the assignment of military commanders now must be made even more carefully with closer attention paid to qualifications, training, and aptitude to ensure that each is prepared to assume both military and political tasks inherent in a single command.

At this writing it is too early to determine whether the new command structure will significantly change anything, whether it will alter the general position ideology—as personified by the Political Commissar—occupies in the armed forces. An early estimate is that the fears of the unnamed Party personnel referred to above are well grounded, that ideology, politics, and perhaps the Party itself are going to be somewhat de-emphasized. The Party, however, has yet to have the last word on the subject.

The command-structure question clearly is the central one with respect to the Party within PAVN, although an inspection of military journals suggests others. One of these, related to the command structure, is the slowly diminishing quality of the Political Commissar and the Political Officer. Another is the functioning of the “political agencies” within PAVN, those Party elements concerned with routine work such as membership recruitment and cadre training. Public criticism paints a picture of those Party organs as in frequent disarray, overlapping one another in work and authority, operating under ill-defined guidelines. There is said to be a lack of Party development at the basic-unit level and a good deal of sloth, corruption, and use of Party authority for personal gain by individuals. The basic approach to correcting these problems is to “codify” Party policy within PAVN, that is, to integrate Party regulations at the lower levels into military regulations.¹³

The Party's problems within PAVN to a large extent mirror the Party's problems in the society as a whole—the growing tendency to question Party centrality, its relevance in the general scheme of things, and whether in fact it any longer makes a major contribution. The questioning appears to be more intense

within the Party than outside of it. Within PAVN troubles are made worse by the fact that PAVN itself is wrestling with what might be called an existential problem, one that is plaguing most armies today. In a time of change, when no one is sure of the shape of future war—or if there will be war—there is great uncertainty as to what will constitute a successful fighting force. Some of the mandatory requirements of the past seem to have been abandoned. Certain constants remain, such as enlightened leadership, technological skill, disciplined organization, foolproof logistical systems, rapid communication, unit pride, high morale and spirit and courage of the individual fighting man. But in army building today, it is very difficult to fix the interrelationship among these old verities then factor in the new requirements. So much has changed in warfare, so much is now uncertain. Hanoi's generals found they were not well prepared for the war in Kampuchea, did not understand it. Many of their preconceptions about warfare were shattered during the China attack in 1979. Hence the search for the proper military formula continues.

The Party interest is primarily ideological, and it is an involvement that dates back to the earliest years. The Party has played the part of role model and definer of soldier character. To the existing martial virtues of courage, tenacity, boldness, and cleverness, it added commitment based on politics as a necessary ingredient in national spirit. This abstraction manifested itself in many ways, and the main one had to do with the fundamental concept of the relationship of men to weapons in modern war. In Vietnam's early military history, technology had not played much of a role, but now it did. The Party's contribution had the effect of triggering a permanent debate, code term for which is *red vs. expert*. It is a dispute compounded of technological, sociological, philosophical, and psychological elements. It is the key to understanding the mindset of today's Vietnamese soldier. Disputants within PAVN ranks all begin with a command premise, which is:

War is a comprehensive test of all strengths of two adversaries: morale, determination, material resources, spiritual forces, strategy, the international situation, and the historic, economic, political and social conditions of each side.¹⁴

From that point on, however, opinion diverges. In somewhat oversimplified terms the issue can be expressed thus: In creating a military force to engage in this "comprehensive test of all strengths," which is more important, man or materiel? In producing the most effective fighting man possible, which counts for more, ideology and motivation or military technology? Should the soldier and the ideal army be red or expert? Over the years the Party in general has pitted the revolutionary model against the expert. It has always dominated the debate and has found many allies in and out of PAVN, some transient and some permanent. Ranged on the other side has been not a force or even a faction, but a shifting collection of technologically minded military and civilians. The early view, and the factional predominance, was on the side of men. General Giap concluded that the lesson to be drawn from the Viet Minh War was that "an insufficiently equipped people's army fighting for a just cause can, with appropriate strategy and tactics, create the conditions needed to conquer a modern army of aggressive imperialism."¹⁵ This appears to be the belief held by all PAVN generals at the time. A change of view came with the Vietnam War—for General Giap, it was the Battle of Ia Drang valley—but it was no clear-cut switch. Even today the "experts" in PAVN are outnumbered among the general officer corps, although they do have new and powerful support, the Soviet military advisors in Vietnam.

The debate between red and expert has always been confused, diffused, and shot through with self-serving arguments. At one level it can be asserted that the issue is unrealistic because it cannot be reduced to an either-or proposition; rather, a balance must be struck between what is technology and what is psychology.

It has been argued that South Vietnam lost the Vietnam War because its army was only "expert" and did not possess the non-communist equivalent of "redness." At the deepest level, beyond the scope of this book, the issue involves our understanding of what probably is the ultimate act by a human being: the willingness deliberately to sacrifice oneself in battle. Such an action compounds the totality of being, involves a nearly infinite number of cultural, social, and psychological influences, and is a human equation so complex no one can truthfully claim comprehension.

The red-expert argument raged within China's PLA during the Mao Tse-tung era and existed in paler form in the USSR's Red Army during the 1930s. In North Vietnam it began after the Viet Minh War when the PAVN modernization program was launched. Part of that effort involved creating a series of specialized military schools and academies. Planning the course work for the new institutions triggered a spirited dispute over the proper division of time between technical and nontechnical subjects. At first it was mostly an argument over breadth of education provided—narrow technological training or broader sociopolitical education—but quickly it polarized into an antagonistic quarrel over the relative value and importance of military expertise and revolutionary consciousness.

No easy settlement is within reach. Even in a politicized military organization such as PAVN, of course, there is a limit to the intrusion of what might be called nonprofessional influences, be they political, ideological, or social. A soldier must be trained and prepared to fight: a portion of his day, of his life, must be devoted to that training. Increasingly, because of technology, training requires mastering complicated weapons and military processes, which demands a steadily growing percentage of his attention and time. That, in turn, inadvertently isolates him in a newly confined world of changed interests, altered values, and different criteria for selecting associates—such is the narrowing syndrome of technological development. The net effect usually is to move revolutionary consciousness toward the periphery.

Much of this argument is mere abstraction. Only at the personal level of the individual soldier does grim reality truly present itself, and that is where the Party, the Political Commissar, and the commander must deal with soldier attitude and perception of the enemy. There the problem can be simply stated: What do you tell a soldier when his enemy is vastly superior in number, weaponry, firepower, and logistics, and that fact cannot be hidden? Obviously you tell him that man is more important than materiel, that what counts in combat is spirit (that is, redness), that he has such superiority of spirit that he is more than equal to the enemy. Meanwhile you seek to improve your technological base. Even though you become logistically strong, you never reach the point where spirit, or redness, becomes unimportant, but you can reach the point where the subject can be dropped. Such was

largely the case with Mao Tse-tung and nuclear weapons. When China had none he belittled the idea that nuclear weapons could be decisive in warfare, asserting that "man is the spiritual atom bomb." Once China got the bomb, deprecation ceased. There is only small genius in an idea that makes a virtue out of necessity.

The argument within PAVN died out for a period since it is not one that ever can be settled with finality and reemerged early in the 1960s with intensification of the Vietnam War—resulting from American involvement—when Hanoi had to face the problem of how best to deal with the new strategic situation. The immediate Party-supplied assertion became that spirit, or redness, was what counted most, although it was clear even then, as it became obvious later, that this view was not shared by everyone in the High Command. The Party launched abusive verbal attacks on "militarists" and "revisionists" within PAVN (all unnamed) for the deleterious effect their expert argument was having on morale and self-confidence. The Party's case was not so much that man was superior to weapons in making war as it was that downgrading the importance of nonmaterial factors undermined the fundamental pillars upon which PAVN had been constructed. One editorialist stated that if the expert view prevailed it would "dissolve the glue" that held the PAVN-Party system together. Guarded counterstatements by military professionals, heavily interspersed with deferential gestures to Party thought and effusive tributes to human, spiritual, and political considerations, argued in terms of priorities. They said emphasis must be placed on perfecting the technology of warmaking if the cause was to survive. Gen. Hoang Van Thai, most outspoken of the technocrats at the time, asserted bluntly, "Either we will acquire the needed technological knowledge or we will be exterminated."¹⁶ Other major figures, including General Giap, refused to side openly with the Party position and attempted to turn the issue by insisting that there was no contradiction and by vigorously attacking those who advocated "either purely military or purely political" doctrines.¹⁷

During the most intense period of the Vietnam War—1965 to mid-1968—the red-expert debate in Hanoi became sharp with respect to nuclear weapons and air power, and specifically how best to cope with those two weapons systems. The PAVN High

Command's view of nuclear weapons was (tacitly) that PAVN had no chance against them. POWs interviewed were unanimous about that. The official view, presented in indoctrination sessions, was that the matter was academic since the war would never advance to the stage of using nuclear weapons. Gen. Song Hao published a series of articles at that time which set forth the official Party line on the subject, one that more or less remains operative today.¹⁸ He made two points: that the United States dared not use nuclear weapons because it feared retaliation by the USSR, the DRV's ally; and the United States realized that nuclear warfare could never be decisive. His reasoning was (and is) specious, even spurious. It is hard to believe that Gen. Song Hao and the Party genuinely believed that the USSR would go to nuclear war with the United States over Vietnam; his assertion of the impotence of nuclear weapons is utter nonsense. Given the reality of no defense against nuclear attack, the Party fell back on those arguments as expedient strategic rationalization.

The question of enemy air power at first drew a mixed sort of response. The official position asserted that air attack could never prove decisive against *dau tranh* strategy but did require certain expert responses. In part the question was whether to meet the American air attacks on the technical front, weapons system for weapons system, or to take the people's war route and try to minimize the effect of the attacks through relocation measures. Both lines were pursued. The DRV with the USSR assembled the most advanced and powerful air defenses the world had ever seen in action. At the same time it launched a major effort through relocation and dispersal to reduce the targets offered. Doctrinally the red-expert issue was straddled by asserting that the DRV could meet the assault technologically even though such assault could not be decisive in any case. Said Giap:

Events during the two years [1965–66] prove that our [air] defense measures have achieved great results. Although the American imperialists have caused certain damage to human lives and property of our people, basically life among our troops and people continues to be stable; the local economy continues to develop, and agricultural production to increase; communication and transport is not interrupted.

We have strengthened our anti-aircraft guns while striving

to develop the effectiveness of jet fighter planes and anti-aircraft missiles in order to create thick and highly effective fire nets. . . .

It is obvious that the independent activities of an air force, even if it is the modern air force of the U.S. imperialists, cannot have the effect of deciding victory on the battlefield. The U.S. Air Force can cause certain damages to our people, but it surely cannot save the U.S. imperialists from complete defeat in their aggressive war against the south. The north's big victories demonstrate the great power of the people's war and of the socialist system. This power has dealt and will deal heavy blows to the U.S. Air Force, smashing its so-called superiority.¹⁹

Except as a temporary expedient to shore up courage or determination, the red-expert arguments in either-or terms become mere rationalization on the battlefield. The unvarnished fact, amply demonstrated throughout the Vietnam War, is that spirit is no substitute for skilled military performance, that courage simply has no chance against massive firepower. It also is a fact that the finest arms mean nothing if spirit—red or otherwise—is absent. Skill and spirit-redness are opposite sides of the same coin. Victory in a battle or in a war goes to the side superior in both. This is not to dismiss the red-expert issue, for the subject, when cast in terms of the relationship of psychology to technology, is both fundamental and all important to any army. Rather, it is to suggest that in the case of PAVN the debate essentially had nonideological roots. The development of PAVN doctrine in the Vietnam War is a history of a steady effort to upgrade weaponry and increase professional expertise by all possible means. This author is aware of no recorded instance in which PAVN generals voluntarily sacrificed expertness in favor of redness.

Unfortunately for the disputants in the upper reaches of PAVN, the argument was not settled by the outcome of the war, nor was the issue even clarified. Victory was achieved but credit could be and was claimed by advocates on both sides. It was argued that the end was a victory of arms—a Soviet-built tank crashing through the gates of the Presidential Palace in Saigon its final lasting symbol. And it was argued that the collapse of ARVN was the triumph of indomitable human will, which largely rendered unnecessary the massive military capability North Viet-

nam had assembled. The issue once again is in the crucible, on the battlefields of Kampuchea.

It would seem that in reality the choice between preserving the revolutionary character of PAVN or building a thoroughly modern professional armed force—if in fact that is the choice to be made—has been resolved in favor of the latter, the wonder being that the reds were able for so long to withstand the influences of military technology. However, in official circles the situation is not seen in such stark terms, but rather it is treated as a matter of dialectic:

The two processes, preparing officers and soldiers politically and ideologically, and application of science and technology [to warfare] are dialectically related. They stimulate each other. . . . But officers must have the necessary technical knowledge and only then can they maintain political-ideological advance.²⁰

Probably the issue can never advance beyond this point, nor does it need to since it will be relegated to the level of abstraction, no longer to intrude into the finite world. The military ethos thus can be preserved.

Notes—Chapter 7

1. Leon Trotsky is credited with inventing the idea of the political commissar, the *polituky*, to keep an eye on the ex-czarist officers who were being used to form the Red Army. Stalin assigned the *polituky* to troop-indoctrination work and so favored them that for a period they became powerful enough in the Red Army to be able to control choice of tactics and strategy. See voluminous RAND interviews and studies by Konrad Kellen, John Donnell, Guy Pauker, Joseph Zasloff, and others at RAND, circa 1968.
2. A returnee under the GNV's *Chieu Hoi* (literally "open arms") Program.
3. Diep Minh, "My Political Commissar," *Vietnam Courier*, 18 Dec. 1972.
4. Gen. Nguyen Chi Thanh, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 25 May 1963.
5. Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, *Hoc Tap*, Jan. 1960.
6. *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 13 Aug. 1959.
7. *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Sept. 1979.
8. *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Nov. 1979.
9. CMPC Standing Directive, quoted in *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Sept. 1980.
10. Gen. Hoang Van Thai, *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Sept. 1982.
11. Vietnam News Agency, 20 Oct. 1980.
12. *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Aug. 1979.
13. *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Feb. 1982.
14. Gen. Van Tien Dung, *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, June 1972. (The epigraph and this quotation are taken from the same source.)
15. Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army*.
16. Gen. Hoang Van Thai, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 5 Sept. 1980.
17. Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap's position at the time was set forth in *Hoc Tap*, Dec. 1960. For discussion of the issue, see *Nhan Dan*, 19 Dec. 1969; and for a much later discussion, see the editorial "Implementing Well the Commander System in PAVN," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Sept. 1979.
18. Gen. Song Hao, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 17 Apr. 1965.
19. Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, *Big Victory, Great Task*.
20. Capt. Le Tu Thanh, *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Oct. 1982.

CHAPTER 8

Leadership

Communist military leadership in Vietnam cannot be analyzed in the same manner as can military leadership systems elsewhere. While at the lower levels, where men are led into battle, there has always been a clear sense of military command, the upper level has never known what might be called orthodox generalship, although that is now beginning to change. The uniqueness of PAVN's senior officers is due to Vietnamese heritage, to the military doctrines PAVN employed and the strategy it devised, and to their experience in building an army and fighting a long series of wars.

One of the most striking manifestations of the collective personality of the early Vietnamese communist leaders is the similar martial quality of military and civilian. In effect, all have been "generals." Truong Chinh (an alias meaning *long march*, a tribute to Maoist strategy) is an important strategist and has written extensively. Some regard him more highly as a military thinker than they do Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap. Bernard Fall, an eminent military historian, once told the author he considered Giap to be, at best, only an adequate military tactician, but a logistical genius (he could move men and materials around a battlefield far faster than anyone had a right to expect). Pham Hung's behavior is much more martial than the mild-mannered Gen. Chu Van Tan. Some leaders seem to be both at the same time; Tran Do and Dong Si Nguyen, for example, shuttle back and forth between PAVN and civilian duties. As a further example of the thesis that "civilians" in the Hanoi Politburo are equally "generals," consider Party Secretary Le Duan. He spent years in the South (1949–55) during which he made military decisions daily, probably more than many other PAVN generals. He appears to have studied Marxist mil-

itary doctrine deeply and seems to take pride in his knowledge of the subject. He also writes well on military strategy. Consider this passage by Le Duan, which is as fine, succinct, and comprehensive a statement of PAVN strategy as has ever been written:

The reason the Vietnamese revolution won victory was that our Party creatively applied Marxist-Leninist military doctrine while raising to a new level the qualitative development of People's War, backbone of Marx's military doctrine. Our innovation was to use violent revolutionary force in two forms: as the political force of the masses and as people's armed force. This involved: staging local uprisings in the countryside and developing the uprising into revolutionary war; coordinating military struggle with political struggle including diplomatic struggle; coordinating uprisings by the masses with revolutionary war, uprisings with attacks and attacks with uprisings; battling the enemy in all three strategic regions, the mountainous jungles, the rural lowlands and the cities; fighting the enemy with the three spearheads of military action (*binh van*); political action (*dan van*) and military proselyting action (*dich van*); coordinating the military three arms: regular, regional, local forces; coordinating guerrilla war with conventional war; coordinating local scale, medium scale and small scale attacks; gaining [political] control by annihilating the enemy and annihilating the enemy by gaining [political] control; firmly adhering to the guideline of fighting a protracted conflict, knowing how to create and seize opportunities to launch strategic offensives that change the war situation and culminate in a general offensive and uprising that crushes the enemy force and wins final victory.¹

This passage says it all. It neatly encompasses virtually everything that has been written in Hanoi about military strategy.

Considering the background of these men, it could hardly be otherwise, for they are perhaps more experienced in the conduct of warfare and have been at it longer and more steadily than any other ruling group in the world. They are revolutionary aesthetes, in no way stereotyped militarists, but they are praetorian. Their minds work in terms of combat, campaigns, victories. Other communist leaders might come to power through revolution (Russia), courtesy of a foreign army (Eastern Europe), or *coup d'état* (Czechoslovakia), but not the Vietnamese communists. All

they have ever achieved has been the fruit of war. For them, power is the barrel of a gun.

When the Vietnamese communist armed force was first created, it inherited no generals, as did the Chinese communists and the Bolsheviks. Rather the Vietnamese were forced to develop their own, and did so out of most unusual stock. For decades these military leaders did not call themselves generals or think of themselves as such. General Giap as principal military figure was not the commander in chief, but the "person in charge." Hence, there are no "original marshals" to be distinguished here, no early general's mentality to be uncovered.

In the formative 1930s Vietnamese communism engaged in no warfare but did develop a leadership familiar with weapons and the conduct of military affairs, and it was moved consistently by militancy. Then, as today, the military metaphor permeates: *dau tranh* and other forms of struggle are central to all activity: battles of production are won, advances are made on the agricultural front, the people are mobilized, spies and traitors are unmasked, heroes are saluted. Vietnamese vocabulary then and now is dominated by such military rhetoric.

The leaders of the rare early military enterprises consisted of only a few men, perhaps no more than a dozen of major influence. They have remained a small and tightly knit brotherhood. The essence of the leadership's success has been its ability to organize for war—certainly it has not been its charisma—its ability to use social organization to mobilize and to motivate. PAVN and all its elements, including its generals, are regarded as tools, as means only. The generals' source of inspiration is the strength of the Party. Their common personality, as far as can be discerned, has been praetorian, dogmatic, self-effacing, and tenacious; their common physical trait has been (perhaps a matter of luck) longevity. Some of these virtues have now become impediments to the development of PAVN.

What is clear at present is that great change is underway throughout the PAVN leadership system, the central determining character being *military professionalism*. This change may stem from the red-expert controversy that raged for years, but it now has moved far beyond that sterile argument. History is pushing PAVN in the direction of professionalism, and nothing can stop

the trend. Among the enormous effects of the process, none is greater than the changes being wrought in the world of the PAVN senior general corps.

The Generals

The PAVN general officer corps today numbers more than 450, in four ranks: senior general, colonel general, lieutenant general, and major general; probably senior colonel (although not colonel) should be regarded as a general officer if the rank is to be judged by the command held.²

The abundance of generals today is in marked distinction to the earlier years, prior to about 1960. During that time there were only five general officers of significance, all senior generals. They, along with two promoted later, make up the entire list of men who have held the rank of senior general. In order of importance, they are: Vo Nguyen Giap, Nguyen Chi Thanh,³ Van Tien Dung, Le Trong Tan, Le Duc Anh, Hoang Van Thai and Chu Huy Man.

In the Viet Minh War the top four generals were Giap, Thanh, Dung, and Chu Van Tan, all members of the Second Party Congress (1951) Central Committee. Those four plus General Hao were members of the 1960 National Defense Council (NDC).⁴ The same five plus General Thai represented the top leadership during the Vietnam War, and all except for the deceased General Thanh were members of the NDC at the end of the war.⁵

There were, of course, other high-level military figures; even so, the early command was remarkably concentrated in a few hands. Today, although the general officer corps has grown in numbers and consequently in complexity, much of its initial simple nature remains—still the imperative need for unity (easier before with fewer generals) and still the eternal factional struggle. PAVN generals, as always, are both united and divided.

The essential character of the association among PAVN generals is the Sinic cultural heritage of political factionalism. In this they simply reflect a broader power struggle within the Party and the system as a whole. Top generals—senior generals, colonel generals, and some lieutenant generals—have their own constituencies, which they control and which control them. The infighting—called *bung di*, or “faction bashing”—is inherent, as

politics is part of any ruling system, and is conducted for its own sake and is its own justification. There are political alliances, some permanent and some temporary, based on familial ties, past associations, and common interests. Personality also has much to do with relations among generals. Hanoi watchers—especially ethnic-Vietnamese Hanoi watchers—place great premium on the factional infighting. They regard it as military leadership by entourage and are forever attempting to track the various struggles for power within PAVN on the basis of competing factions.

The substance of such factional infighting—what might be called the ingredients of *bung di*—is found in various military and quasi-military doctrinal disputes. Some are ideological, some personal. Some are transitory, and some have been around since the beginning of PAVN. Still others rage, then vanish for years, only to reappear. Most are reflections of broader ideological struggles outside of PAVN; a few originate within the armed forces then spill over into society at large.

These major doctrinal disputes among generals should be noted briefly. An important early one involved PAVN's (and Hanoi's) external relations, embodied in the choice (or balance) between China and the USSR. PAVN, as noted in Chapter 1, owes a great deal to China. In the early years, until well into the Vietnam War, Chinese military doctrine seemed to dominate PAVN thinking. Gradually, as the war progressed, PAVN generals came to regard Chinese strategic thinking as increasingly inappropriate for them. With the breach of Sino-Vietnamese relations in 1979, Chinese military doctrine officially fell into nearly total disrepute. There also was heavy secondary fallout. Ethnic Chinese as well as ethnic minority Montagnards (because of early associations with China) were denied promotions, harassed and often expelled from both PAVN and the Party—treated, said Radio Beijing, as “bees up one's sleeve.” The pro-Chinese vs. pro-Soviet doctrinal dispute has been won by the pro-Soviet faction, but as a factional issue it is not dead, merely dormant.

Another doctrinal dispute—the most important perhaps—is the red vs. expert (discussed in Chapter 7), which generated a number of subdisputes, such as ideologue vs. pragmatist, hard-liner vs. soft-liner, or, pejoratively, reactionary vs. opportunist. Still another one stems from the fact of geographic regionalism

in Vietnam, the familiar North, Center, South division of the country, which now has come down largely to a North vs. South factionalism. This always has been an unequal battle—the North is predominant—but resolution remained in abeyance until the end of the Vietnam War when the North moved to settle it. The PLAF was merged into PAVN, and the Party's military *apparat* in the South was emasculated. Purely southern military figures either vanished into limbo or managed to transcend their origin and become “national” rather than southern generals.⁶

Revelations made after the end of the Vietnam War permit a reasonably accurate reconstruction of the military leadership in the South during that time. At the start the foremost figure, for both military and nonmilitary affairs, was Nguyen Van Linh (alias Nguyen Van Cuc, Muoi Ut, and Muoi Cuc), supposedly a Le Duan protégé who took over leadership in the South from Le Duan in the 1950s and supervised PAVN-Party affairs into the 1960s. In 1964, when the war enlarged in scope and greater authority was required, Gen. Nguyen Chi Thanh arrived, and the military command in the South was reorganized. General Thanh became the top commander and Linh his principal deputy. When General Thanh was killed in mid-1967, he was succeeded by Pham Hung, from Hanoi, who again reorganized the southern *apparat*, appointing three deputies: Linh, as Political Commissar and principal Party representative; Col. Gen. Tran Van Tra (alias Tu Chi), as principal Military Deputy (and, later, representative to the Joint Military Commission established under the Paris Agreements and, still later, chief of the postwar Military Management Committee in Saigon); and Nguyen Van Dang (alias Pham Xuan Thai and Hai Van), as principal “political” deputy, that is, liaison with various southern-front organizations, chiefly the NLF.

Also settled by the end of the war, or at least relegated to the academic level, was the great doctrinal dispute over strategy. It raged throughout the war—a great debate on how to achieve victory, that is, unification. Should it be with regular-force strategy (which came in several variants) or by means of revolutionary guerrilla war (also in several variant forms)? Victories in the infighting shifted back and forth during the war, reflecting success and failure on the battlefield and the course of external events that affected the war. The regular-force strategists always dom-

inated the PAVN High Command. Much of the challenge to their position came from outside the armed forces, chiefly from Truong Chinh, who was able to muster considerable backing from within the Politburo.

Other doctrinal disputes that have nagged the Party over the years, and to various degrees have affected or involved PAVN generals, are: the pace-of-war issue, that is, pursuit of the war vs. economic development (largely a debate over allocation of resources); self-reliance vs. foreign dependency (how much should PAVN rely on the USSR?); and the “quality of socialism” issue, whether material incentives or moral exhortation should be the primary approach in solving various internal social problems, including problems within PAVN. Still others (discussed below) are those involving strategy in Kampuchea and meeting the China threat.

PAVN Officer Corps

Official PAVN histories leave the impression, without actually saying so, that the officer corps was created full-blown overnight out of nothing. Since this is patently impossible—nothing is slower or more painstaking than building an officer corps in an army—the development did not take place as implied, and we lack detailed information about formation of the corps. This denial is not intended to detract, however, from the wonder that the corps was able to survive its birth at the end of World War II and go on to whip itself into a truly effective military leadership group.

General Giap, architect of the enterprise, had only a limited manpower pool from which to draw—at most, perhaps a few thousand Vietnamese with previous military command experience or the natural aptitude for it. With the limited resources he had, he obviously did well. One group was drawn from the corps of noncommissioned officers from the *Garde Indochinoise*, the French colonial force of the 1930s that remained active throughout World War II; he also drew from other French military forces abroad. Many of those men chose to oppose the Viet Minh, however. A second group came from the Grand Volunteer Army, formed by the occupying Japanese, who were more willing than the French to train Vietnamese as military leaders. A third consisted of wartime guerrillas and guerrilla leaders, some of whom

were schooled in China, but most self-taught. Not all of these experienced military men, of course, represented officer material. As Bernard Fall noted, even if there had been mass defections from the force of 79,000 French-trained Vietnamese soldiers, they would not have brought with them an officer or noncommissioned officer corps sufficient to provide the encadrement for the Viet Minh's fighting force of 100,000 men. Of the Vietnamese in the French colonial army in Indochina, only about 500, or less than 1 percent, were officers; about 2,000, or 5 percent, were noncommissioned officers.

Initially, then, the PAVN officer corps was both thin and disparate. The commanders of the first six Viet Minh divisions to take to the field, Fall noted, consisted of two ethnic minority Montagnards, two Vietnamese who had lived in China and been trained by the Chinese Nationalists, one former noncommissioned officer in the French colonial army, and one long-time Party organizer and revolutionary with no formal military training at all. To compensate, the PAVN officer corps was forced to develop uniquely, in ways that minimized the lack of trained and experienced personnel. Great premium was placed on collective military decision making, which yielded the dual-command system. A strategy was sought that did not require the presence of unavailable generals for implementation. The concept of an officer corps was not acknowledged. Hierarchy was played down. The military consisted of two elements: combatants and cadres. Leadership aimed at skill in revolution, using whatever violence—military or nonmilitary—was required, and in those days it was necessary only to distinguish between leader and led. Leaders were cadres, a rank found inside and outside PAVN, and what was important was cadre status, not whether military or nonmilitary. Out of this concept developed the PAVN leadership, first called military cadre, now PAVN officer. In early leadership, the term *cadre* had distinct, even unique, meaning, and the Vietnamese cadre is indeed an institution unto himself. He is, at least in idealized form, a social superman—talented, dedicated, selfless, tireless, tough but tender, incorruptible, with perfection his sole standard of behavior. Ho Chi Minh, with his penchant for no-nonsense language, put the leadership burden squarely on the cadre's back: Cadres are the foundation of every

job; success or failure depends on whether cadres are competent or incompetent.

There is no equivalent to the cadre in non-Marxist societies, either within the government bureaucracy (with its three forms of service—military, foreign, civil), or outside government among activist-volunteer organizations. The closest counterpart, perhaps, is the old-time U.S. trade union organizer. Within the Vietnamese system the cadre is the figure who motivates, energizes, communicates, and, above all, organizes.

Over the years PAVN and the Party have evolved what might be called the idealized profile of the cadre *cum* PAVN officer:

1. He is master of the “technique of mobilization,” that is, organizing to get things done. This is not exactly the same thing as leadership. It is more like juggling. His skill generally is thought to be based on innate ability plus experience, not the product of education or even ideological training.
2. He is zealously ideological, meaning highly class-conscious, proletarian-oriented. He is red in that he maintains close, even mystic, relations with the masses, and has not simply memorized Marxist-Leninist text. In fact, his ideological state is more intuitive than intellectual.
3. He is self-disciplined, ascetic, untempted by material lures, idealistic even to the point of naiveté.
4. He is totally loyal and obedient, never questioning the philosophic underpinnings of his society. He is responsive to his orders and does not innovate widely in carrying them out (although he is expected to show ingenuity with existing approved methods).
5. He is substantively or professionally trained, that is, expert. He is technically proficient in some area. He is expected to attend and do well at training and retraining schools.

Such is the ideal, but great the gap with reality. The number of individuals turned up by genetic accident that fit the foregoing description is limited in any society. The quality of the PAVN officer was at its zenith in the Viet Minh War and has declined steadily ever since. Increasingly, since the end of the Vietnam War, complaints of officer behavior have been publicly aired by the Hanoi press. Among the main criticisms are failure to assert disciplinary authority, laziness, corruption, “commandism” (pull-

ing rank), failure to maintain military equipment (said to be the reason for heavy casualties in the Kampuchean war), ignorance or indifference to Party military policy, and "hedonistic, indolent attitudes."

With innate ability rare, training time long, and attrition rate high, PAVN suffers from a permanent shortage of high-quality officers and is forced to utilize the mediocre and inadequate, which is probably the main weakness in the entire officer system.

The size of the PAVN officer corps is not known in exact numbers. Some extrapolation, however, provides a rough tally of the growth of the corps over the years.

PAVN OFFICER CORPS GROWTH

Date	PAVN Size	Officer Corps
1945	40,000	2,500
1955	210,000 ⁷	20,000
1965	400,000	50,000
1975	650,000	110,000
1983	1,000,000	170,000 ⁸

PAVN Leadership

Attempts employing various methods have been made over the years to dissect for analysis the Vietnamese communist leadership. Paucity of reliable and detailed information has produced generally unsatisfactory results, at best fragmentary and offering a basis for only tentative judgments. A good deal is known about the five senior generals and the seven colonel generals and about some of the lieutenant generals, but beyond them the individual figures of the PAVN officer corps are enigmas. Their names, ranks, present military assignments, and past military duties, from which certain conclusions can be drawn with respect to skill and experience, are known but little else. What is required, of course, is access to the standard kind of data used in studying military leadership elsewhere, namely:

1. Factors that shaped the generals initially, that is, their social background, family, early life, education, languages learned, early peer groups.

2. Career experience, including entrance into the military, perceived pathways to promotion, assignments, travel, social traumas and crises experienced (and perspectives developed), view of political power, peer-group–factional association.
3. Values held, that is, military and Party, social values, social consensus (what the society and PAVN stand for, where they should go, and by what route).
4. Controls and influences, chiefly peer and social pressures and constraints; Party indoctrination; rewards and punishments; foreign influences.

The PAVN officer corps never was systematically and thoroughly examined by anyone, not even by the U.S. government during the long Vietnam War. That may in part explain the outcome of the war. RAND Corporation did a great deal of interviewing of lower-level PLAF and PAVN cadres and officers, but not, of course, of the High Command. Transcripts of those interviews are available but in nearly indigestible form.

William Turley, who probably has spent more effort on PAVN than any other scholar, attempted to apply the methodology used in studying China's PLA (the "generations" of military approach) with some illuminating results. He established basic categories of generals: political, ethnic minority, prison (that is, those incarcerated together), resistance (Viet Minh War), and regional (for example, southern). Unfortunately he did not have access to the same amount of data available to those who studied the PLA.⁹

Bernard Fall, in some modest early studies of PAVN and DRV leaders, found most to be from families that had for one or more generations served in the French civil service or been village gentry. Some 73 percent were of bourgeois background (middle class, professional, or intellectual); 19 percent were peasant gentry, and only 8 percent were proletarian. He also found that formal education among military leaders was low but that this factor was not particularly important.¹⁰

Nguyen Van Canh and, earlier, P. J. Honey and others have attempted to study PAVN leaders from the standpoint of factionalism or from patterns of familial relationships. Melvin Gurtov of RAND studied fifty-one PAVN officers (mostly company grade) for attitude and behavioral patterns. He found that what

was important in career development was Party membership and the good will of Party leaders, battlefield performance, leadership experience, good ideological grounding (termed *political awareness*), and the proper (proletarian) social background.¹¹

What all of these studies seem to suggest is that among PAVN generals what counts most in peer evaluation is professional capability, combat experience, and a secure base within the treacherous arena of factional infighting.

PAVN troops themselves developed an informal method of classifying their officers. PAVN POWs described this categorization to the author and others during the war. The best combat officer was termed a Driver. He was brave, professional, well motivated, and "hard core." If a Driver placed great premium on military skill and technology (that is, was an expert), he was called a Careerist; if he was more ideologically oriented (that is, a red), he was called a Devotee. Both terms were complimentary. A Careerist was one who held that "war is skill in battle," while a Devotee believed that "war is devotion to the cause," as one soldier told the author. Standing apart from the Driver was the Practitioner, who might or might not be a line officer, who was measured by his ability to get things done within PAVN—that is, he was a skilled administrator but also a fixer, an implementer. If he had a combat assignment he was called a Practitioner-Implementer, if a services or supply assignment, a Practitioner-Cadre.

While there is a dearth of biographical detail about PAVN officers, there is an abundance of information about what might be called the routine of the corps. Open sources provide much material on recruiting and training of officers, Party attitude toward the corps, honors and awards, and *kiem thao* (self-criticism). Another rich source, although not always a trustworthy one, is found in the memoirs of PAVN generals whose wartime reticence has been replaced by candid verbosity in these first-person accounts.

From an examination of these materials, certain conclusions about PAVN leadership suggest themselves—some of them self-evident. The first and most obvious characteristic of upper-level PAVN leadership is its stability, a result of durable qualities and the survival instincts of its individual members, although cause and effect seem well mixed here. The six senior generals listed

above, all but one of whom are original PAVN leaders, are still in command or highly influential, except for one claimed by death. The High Command, including the colonel generals as well as senior generals, probably make up the most long-lived roster of military figures existing anywhere, just as the Hanoi Politburo is one of the world's oldest ruling groups. The small band of men who formed the PAVN officer corps in the mid-1940s remains in command today, save for the few who have died.

The fact of stability cannot be questioned, and some of the reasons for it certainly are common purpose, dedication, and sheer good luck. But these only contributed. The stability of PAVN derives from the central fact that officers from the very start were indoctrinated to obey without question so they could command without hesitation. Out of discipline came certitude, the certitude that yielded stability.

The second characteristic of PAVN leadership is the unorthodox military quality of the origins, backgrounds, and lives of these top military figures. Obviously a paradox is revealed here. The PAVN High Command is vastly experienced in military matters, has been involved in the conduct of war longer and more continuously than virtually any other group of military leaders. Yet, by standards normally used to judge military leaders, the Vietnamese are almost neophytes. Primarily this is because they are creatures of the Party's civilian process. Being so, they are unique: generals who are martial but not military, leaders who frequently are less militant than their civilian counterparts.

The weakness represented by a lack of orthodox military background was not particularly significant in the past. It assumes great importance now, as PAVN attempts to become a truly modern military organization. Military technology has imposed a common pattern on all armies, and differences among generals has become only nominal. The fact is, however, that most PAVN generals are so lacking in modern-day military skills and knowledge of military science that elsewhere they would hardly be considered proper company-grade officer material. For the first time in their careers they now must do what generals normally do: survey the strategic scene, take measure of potential enemies and possible allies, estimate balance of forces, build grand strategies, devise contingency responses, and arrange for reliable sources of

military hardware. While Hanoi's generals are among the world's most experienced, they are novices at this level of generalship and their performance to date has not been impressive. As PAVN increasingly places premium on technology, combined arms operations, complex tactics, and computer-designed strategy, these shortcomings and inadequacies become even more important. Whatever admirable qualities can be attributed to the original form of the PAVN officer corps, the corps now is perilously close to being an anachronism.

A third characteristic is the diverse, non-Marxist social background of the PAVN leadership, its great spread in class origin. Bernard Fall's listing of the six original PAVN division commanders, noted above, well illustrates this diversity. Today, in recruiting officers, a great deal of emphasis is placed on proletarian background; no one can become an officer unless he is *ban co* class (poor for many generations), yet among the generals there is hardly one true proletarian. Most are upper class (colonial Vietnam hardly had a middle class), that is, village gentry, mandarin, even royal origin. The rest are not proletarians, but ethnic minority Montagnards, who, at best, are classed as a sort of "honorary proletariat." This, of course, is typical of first-generation revolutionaries, who usually are not proletarians, but individuals with high political consciousness stemming from a sense of grievance and manifesting itself in a spirit of revolt.

The fourth characteristic, which tends to flow from the third, is a common sense of psychological identification, what might be called a "bunker mentality." It is not exactly unity, rather a common bond, a harmony of outlook that transcends all else. The generals may disagree on doctrinal issues, may battle each other spiritedly in the great game of faction bashing, but underneath, in terms of personal philosophy and outlook, they are uncommonly similar.

The generals are oriented toward a collective leadership, thus are self-effacing. No oversized egos here, no Pattons, Rommels, or Montgomerys. Even the legendary Giap on close examination is seen as a rather flat personality, mostly logician and ex-high-school history teacher. Flamboyant military figures strode across the scene in the early days, but none ever made it to the top. The unwritten rule seems to be that High Command generals

must subordinate their personalities to the collective leadership. That trait now may be eroding somewhat. Since the end of the Vietnam War, we have seen more of a “high posture” taken by the victorious PAVN generals. Certainly in the first days, flushed with success, they reveled boastfully in their new status and prestige. Such behavior may have been temporary, and, sobered by postwar reverses, they now may have returned to a more modest stance.

The leadership is defensive-minded, a somewhat unusual trait among military men with a hell-for-leather tradition. PAVN leaders see themselves outnumbered and beleaguered, forced to think mostly in terms of survival. This has taught them caution and circumspection, if not deviousness. They forever search for more strength, firmer outside support, larger stockpiles of supplies. They always preach the doctrine of self-sufficiency, and they prepare for the worst. Consequently Vietnamese military decision making is collective, unitary, and a product of group thinking. The door always is left open for strategic retreat into political settlement, placing a premium on generals with political rather than military virtues and, in turn, politicizing the High Command although not in the orthodox meaning of the term.

They were, although most did not care to admit it, romantics—seekers after revolutionary glamour, doers of great martial deeds, in some instances even war lovers. These qualities led them to justify war totally and to rationalize unlimited sacrifice in its name. For them no price was too high, no amount of spilled blood too great if it was in the service of the golden cause.

The commonality of these characteristics may have resulted from long association—some of the generals have been working with each other almost daily for forty years. Or it may be due to their shared early social traumas or perhaps simply their Vietnamese-ness. Whatever the reason, their traits combined to create a singular kind of general on the world scene, one the likes of whom we will see no more, now that he is passing into history.

Future Leadership

The extraordinary performance of the PAVN officer corps through two long wars, during which it performed its duties with singular dedication and scored final victories, has tended to ob-

scure the fact of its darker side—that within the corps are the seeds of its own destruction. Awareness of this shadow exists within PAVN, and a mighty effort is underway to meet what may be its gravest challenge. Ironically the PAVN leadership qualities that contributed so much to victory in war have become monumental impediments to progress in the postwar period.

Vietnamese leaders in war were characterized, above all, by a kind of tenacious, implacable determination—some would say fanaticism—that sustained them and enabled them to persevere against formidable opposition. Theirs was a wartime virtue. After 1975 a new kind of leadership was required, one possessed of new virtues; yet nothing changed in Hanoi, and the old leadership proved utterly incapable of managing a modern or semi-modern society in peacetime. The military leaders must share heavily in this blame, but such criticism is in a way unfair. In what might be called the George Patton syndrome, leadership appropriate for one situation but not another, the leaders are criticized for not altering their characters, adopting a new outlook, in effect, not becoming new men.

The irony is that the postwar failure is traceable almost entirely to victory in war. The PAVN officer corps entered the euphoria of victory in the Vietnam War as heroes of the impossible. They had achieved a goal most Vietnamese communists in their hearts thought unobtainable. In the first few months of peace, the corps basked in this sudden glory, the “little darlings” of the society. Even then there were evident weaknesses in it and in its military system. PAVN was anachronistic, its officer corps undereducated and overage, in short, ill-prepared for whatever would be required of it in the future.

These were, however, only dark clouds on the horizon. PAVN's first postwar challenge, the southern resistance movement, was met adequately, although it actually was not much of a challenge. The second call to arms, against Pol Pot, seemed manageable at first with the invasion of Kampuchea, but as the war deepened and became protracted, serious shortcomings in the leadership surfaced, particularly with respect to mastery of the new technology pressed on PAVN by Soviet advisers. The China attack seems to have been the capper, driving home to the High Command the realization that the PAVN officer corps was seriously

inadequate and that monumental efforts would be required to enable it to meet the semipermanent China threat as well as future needs in general. There was no sense of panic in this assessment, simply the conclusion that the PAVN officer corps had been tried and found wanting and that this was a condition that must be rectified.

A five-year plan to restructure the corps was ordered, part of the "Great Campaign" to improve all the PAVN. An examination of the program can provide insight into what the leadership perceived as weaknesses in the corps as well as some idea of the sort of leadership-to-be expected to develop in the years ahead.

It was a delicate undertaking and proceeded slowly. Planning the overhaul began in 1978, but the program itself did not get off the drafting board until 1980. Officially it is labeled the 1981–85 PAVN Officer Development Program and involves four main areas of activity. The first is to evaluate the long-term needs of the officer corps and prepare recruitment and training programs to meet them. This involves identifying sources of officer material in the society and determining the kinds of skills officers must possess and the sort of education and military training they must receive in order to acquire them.

Clearly it is the opinion of members of the High Command that the main weakness to be overcome is the low level of technical competency among officers. It is not a matter of native inability, but one of undereducation; it is an ingrained problem. During the Vietnam War, interrogators often heard stories that were hard to believe from PAVN POWs about the sheer technical incompetence of their officers. The shortcomings were seen to be even worse later in Kampuchea. Warfare in the past decade once again has been virtually revolutionized through new weapons systems that offer extreme advantage on the battlefield to the commander who knows how to use them. In this knowledge, PAVN officers lag far behind, hardly having caught up to the 1975 level.

The thinness in mastery of modern military science reaches all the way to the top, particularly to the top. Probably not more than one or two PAVN general officers engage in strategic thinking or are trained to do it. Even broad-scale strategic planning

appears beyond most of them: the strategic thinking that does occur is probably done by Soviet advisors.

Much of the pressure for development in this area comes from the major-general level. To what degree the High Command appreciates the problem is difficult to establish. Lip service is paid to the need for radically new kinds of military training by the top generals, but little of that has been translated into specific training programs. Rather, most effort to date consists of re-training—reiteration of past education.

The education of PAVN officers prior to 1975 was cursory. Little need was perceived for extended officer training, and, in fact, there was something of a prejudice against much formal schooling. An officer's education consisted mostly of his initial officer-candidate-school training, short courses in the field (five to seven days), and what might be termed on-the-job training, that is, sandtable exercises prior to a military operation and extensive critiques afterward.

PAVN operated two small officer-training centers before and during the Viet Minh War, one at Tong northwest of Hanoi and the other in rural Quan Ngai province, the first employing some Chinese instructors and the second some Japanese. Training lasted from one to two months. Considerably more officer training was conducted during the Vietnam War, much of it specialized one-month courses in advance of a winter-spring campaign. Fundamentals tended to be given short shrift. The best training center appears to have been the Xuan Mai Infiltration Training Center near Hanoi, through which passed most PAVN officers and enlisted men prior to the start of their journey down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Textbooks used at Xuan Mai were captured later in the South, and the educational level of these books indicates that schooling there was of high quality, although much of it was ideological rather than technical.

PAVN officer training was systematized and augmented beginning about a year after the end of the Vietnam War, apparently because of Soviet prodding and with material assistance from the USSR. PAVN military journals currently make reference to some six military academies and twenty-one military schools, although details about them—exactly what they are and what they teach—remain sketchy and somewhat contradictory. The most

prestigious school is the PAVN Military Institute outside of Hanoi, opened on 1 January 1977. In the PAVN military education hierarchy, it is comparable to the National War College in Washington. The Institute's director is Lieut. Gen. Hoang Minh Thao.

The Party also operates a network of schools for PAVN officers, the highest of which appears to be the PAVN Political Commissar School established in January 1976. PAVN officers also attend the regular Party schools, including the most important of all, the Ho Chi Minh Party School in Hanoi. Much officer training comes in Vietnamese civilian educational institutions, either technical schools and colleges servicing officers sent to them or ROTC-type training that prepares youths for military service.¹²

As a major part of the new Five-Year Officer Development Program, PAVN in the 1982–83 school year began operating its own system of secondary schools. These are high schools attended only by those who plan a career in the armed forces as officers or noncommissioned officers. Under the arrangement youths still in elementary school are encouraged to decide on a military career and those who do, apply to the Ministry of Defense, submitting a letter of recommendation from a local Party committee. Then they sit for a nationwide written examination supervised by a new Defense Ministry organ called the Military School Student Selection Commission. Such high-level control apparently is designed to reduce improper influences in the selection process. Those chosen enter the special PAVN-run high schools then go on to advanced training, followed by active service. This new program at the high school level has become something of a special officer-recruiting drive, with newspaper editorials urging parents to encourage their sons to take the examination. A March 1983 press report said that “tens of thousands of youths have displayed a desire to follow the example of their fathers and brothers in helping develop the armed forces. A great number of youths took the exam. Selection boards worked hard at all levels . . . [all] creating conditions for youths to choose the glorious path of defending the socialist fatherland.”¹³

A second training reform, ordered by a 1982 directive, revised the curriculum used in senior-officer institutes. Classwork now is to concentrate on four areas: leadership methods; man-

agerial, or administrative, skills; techniques of troop indoctrination; and military-civilian relations. Training in managerial, or administrative, skills; techniques of troop indoctrination; and military-civilian relations. Training in managerial, or administrative, skills involves work in what is termed "cybernetic automated command operations," that is, use of computers and other advanced technology in the conduct of warfare. Most of the instruction in that area is being done by Soviet advisors using Soviet-built equipment.¹⁴ Stress on the need for expertise also comes in the military journals.¹⁵ The tone of the articles indicates that resistance to use of advanced technology remains strong in the upper levels of the PAVN officer corps.¹⁶

The opposition is not against technology as such, but is a reflection of fears by some factions in PAVN that it can be used against them. In the red vs. expert debate, of course, the computer is *the* major weapon the expert can employ against the red.

What is at issue in the reform of senior-level military schooling is whether the PAVN officer corps is to be deliberately professionalized. The issue can be bridged—much of it is abstraction anyway—but not the danger inherent in creating a technologically oriented, elitist officer corps as an institution distinct from the society or, more important, from the Party. As this is being written, the issue had not been fully joined. Among those paying homage to professionalism, writings on PAVN's future officer education are peppered with obeisant remarks on the importance of ideology, but no clear breakthrough has been made.¹⁷

The next major area of the PAVN Five-Year Officer Development Program concerns the officer "age bulge," that is, the problem represented by the fact that the officer corps is filled with overage individuals who should be mustered out but who, for various reasons, do not want to leave, often because they have no prospects outside of the military. Official parlance delicately refers to the age bulge as the "numbers of cadres problem," defined as "the phenomenon that many have joined the corps but few have departed."¹⁸ The prescription is to weed out the corps, not exactly a purge, but a severe selecting-out process. The criteria for determining who is to leave are age and training-education.

General Thai, in charge of the program, describes the issue frankly:

Many middle level and high level officers have experienced several wars of resistance and now are old, in poor health, unable to maintain combat readiness. . . . Thus it is an urgent necessity to reassign and redeploy [these]. . . . We must consider "officers moving up and officers moving down" as a normal matter. We must put the interests of the task before us above everything else. We should not waver in redeploying officers, nor seek to save face nor be moved by sentiment or by the individual's "reputation" and "merit."¹⁹

Age limits for each officer rank is the mechanism used to determine departures. These have been fixed by Article 32 of the Council of Ministers directive establishing the Officer Development Program. Current age limits are: company-grade officers, 38; majors, 43; lieutenant colonels, 48; colonels, 55; and senior colonels and general officers, 60.

To assist those officers reaching mandatory retirement age (they are called *Article 32 officers*) return to civilian life, a system has been established to permit them to attend trade school or college. They also are officially guaranteed a job. These benefits do not apply to individuals with less than ten years service.²⁰

This program is both delicate and difficult. The individuals affected are a powerful group within the political system whose members the leadership has no wish to alienate. Further, there is no desire to denigrate those who have given long and loyal service but for whom there is now no room. Administration of the program is also complicated by the fact that those whom it seeks to replace are in control of the replacement machinery, and subterfuge appears to be commonplace in the implementation. Compromises are made, such as transfer to some sinecure post rather than demobilization, a common one being "military advisor" to Vietnamese grade schools. The newly established reserve-officer system also has become something of a dumping ground for overage regular officers.

The High Command presses the program with determination. Media reports indicate that in the 1979–83 period, some 50,000 PAVN officers were demobilized, transferred to less de-

manding duty, or reassigned in the hope their performance would improve in a new assignment. No breakdown was available to indicate how many actually left the service. It seems certain that shuffling of this magnitude—one out of every five officers—had a very disruptive effect on PAVN, a turbulence that could abate and leave the corps a more efficient instrument.

The third area addressed in the PAVN Officer Development Program involves managerial methods and improved administration both by the corps and in the corps. It might be described as adding a business-school dimension to PAVN. The principal focus appears to be on personnel matters—developing better, more scientific, more cost-efficient methods of selecting, assigning, and promoting officers—and generally managing the system so as to make it more effective. This focus extends beyond the existing corps in a search for new and better officer material. The economic and technological sectors of the civilian society are screened for bright young persons who would be good additions to the PAVN officer corps or be able to provide needed skills. Not all of those discovered are inducted; some become part of the reserve-officer system.

The newly created PAVN Reserve Officer Corps²¹ is composed of (1) demobilized PAVN noncommissioned officers who continue their military careers as reserve officers; (2) civilians with special skills needed by the military in the event of major war (those from the communication and transportation sectors, for example); and (3) male scientific-technical cadres and college graduates who can escape military service in some instances by joining the reserves.²² The purpose of the corps, said General Thai, is to “ensure we have an adequate number of high quality officers in the next five or ten years or beyond.”²³

In addition to personnel matters, the managerial-administrative program also seeks to improve officer performance by sharpening methods used for individual evaluation and for measuring the effectiveness of their military commands. It seeks to reduce paperwork and raise the efficiency of staff work; it is designed to audit inventories and supply records more carefully. It is, in short, as General Thai says, “a search for scientific management.”

The fourth, and final, area of the PAVN Five-Year Officer

Development Program involves the more mundane, but still highly important, pursuit of individual officer interests. These include pay and benefits, "career tracks," commendations and intangible honors, uniforms, insignia, and unit designations—what officially is called "concern for the material and spiritual lives of PAVN officers." On High Command orders, virtually the entire text of PAVN's internal rules and regulations is being rewritten. The basic documents involved are two laws approved recently by the National Assembly: The PAVN Officers' Service Law and the PAVN Officers' Military Obligation Law.²⁴ This represents the first full revision of basic statutes governing military officers since the 1958 "regularization" program went into effect (discussed in Chapter 1). General Thai explained the rationale behind the new effort:

We must systematically improve the policies and regulations governing remuneration and commendations for officers, so as to provide them with incentive to develop officer talent . . . especially long range development of skilled [military] specialists.²⁵

The PAVN Five-Year Officer Development Program is a comprehensive effort to address what might be called surface-level problems. These are serious, knotty, and must be solved if PAVN is to develop properly. The program outlined, if pushed through to completion, probably will serve that purpose. An interim evaluation of the reform program made midway through it by Maj. Gen. Duong Han, the Ministry of Defense official charged with PAVN officer training, found five continuing shortcomings: an insufficient number of officer candidates, politicized criteria in student selection, poor-quality instructors and faculty, insufficient attention to technological education, and generally poor school administrative practices.²⁶

There is within the PAVN leadership system a deeper malaise that the reform program does not appear to have addressed. The atmosphere in which PAVN generals operate tends to isolate them. They are part of a society-wide control system so effective that it can damp down or shunt off nearly all social discontent, even constructive criticism, including that coming from within PAVN. This may be comfortable for the generals, doubt-

less for top brass it is agreeable, but it is dangerous for PAVN's future. The High Command is denied the benefits of frank criticism; no in-house ombudsman is found in PAVN. This can, and does, create a climate of smugness among the generals about themselves and their performance. Unless there is pressure to change, there will be no change since they are insulated from even the suggestion that a need exists. If improvement comes, it will be mere accidental by-product. These men are bugs in amber and do not know it.

What is it about the highest level of PAVN leadership that requires change? The careers of these top generals, seen in kaleidoscopic fashion, all possess a single dominating motif: total force. Their entire lives have been bound up with it, both where it was appropriate and natural and where it was not. In all-out war, application of total force generally may be the best strategy, but it usually is not relevant in times of peace or in the face of limited threat. The PAVN High Command, composed of the same generals who fought the Vietnam War, approached postwar challenge—potential resistance in the South, Pol Pot guerrillas along the border, insulting Chinese behavior—with the same absence of reserve as they did total war: smash the opposition, crush the objectors, apply maximum force. Such a response comes naturally to commanders who have known only a lifetime of combat. Theirs is a frozen mindset. They know only one solution to any problem: vigorous, unrestrained application of all available power.

Peace brings different needs and the requirement of a changed military leadership. Peace by its very nature requires different responses to problems such as economic development, amicable foreign relations, solicitation of foreign aid. That was the challenge the Hanoi leadership—civilian and military—failed to meet. Assessments and evaluations were made and problem-solving decisions taken on the basis of the assumption that total application of force was required. The result was a bogged-down, protracted war in Kampuchea, a hot-cold war with China, total isolation in the region, and a ruined economy. The Hanoi leadership—the Party civilians perhaps are most guilty, but PAVN generals also must assume much responsibility—simply could not adjust to the softer ways of peace, could not throw off the conditioning of a lifetime at war.

Yet—and this is the problem—the PAVN generals do not see

that they are prisoners of their own wartime heritage. Quite the opposite. They remain utterly impressed by what seems to them a record of their infallibility, and they acknowledge no need for rectification. PAVN requires overhaul, upgrading, and change, they argue, but PAVN's high-level leadership does not. Thus the generals themselves represent the greatest threat to PAVN's future.

This speaks for the present. What then of the future, the successors to the PAVN generals who have been in charge for so long, those younger officers waiting patiently in the wings for their summons to power? The author spent the summer of 1969 interviewing PAVN officers in *chieu hoi* and POW camps, mostly men in their thirties (who now would be in their early fifties) to determine what sort of leaders members of that group could be expected to become. Unfortunately, the research materials of the study were lost in a fire in Saigon in 1972, and only some notes still exist. They, along with memory, reveal that four general characteristics appeared in virtually all of the fifty or so officers interviewed:

1. They tended to be highly idealistic, naively so. They believed in the perfectibility of society in utopian terms. They thought all social problems could be solved, all social conflict could be resolved. They appeared to hold these beliefs because of their past insulation from external ideas, even including Marxism. Their lives and education had been remarkably free of the infusion of foreign thought.
2. They were strongly nationalistic, and chauvinistic, in varying degrees (in attitudes toward the Chinese and Soviets). Most were suspicious of the motives of all foreigners, that is, latently xenophobic.
3. They manifested great loyalty to and faith in the leadership of both Party and military. With respect to their cause—unification of North and South Vietnam under Hanoi's banner—there also was full commitment; however, a minority (perhaps one-third) thought there were limits to the price that should be paid to achieve the goal, while the rest held that no price was too great.
4. They were poorly educated, many having gone no farther than the sixth grade. A few were illiterate. The majority had basic knowledge of mathematics and science.

Based on this study, one would conclude that the future gen-

erals of PAVN would be dedicated but not very competent. It appears that is also the conclusion reached by Hanoi officials and the reason PAVN has embarked on the intensive efforts to improve the technical knowledge and skills of its field- and company-grade officer corps. Some of the naiveté, which undoubtedly is still present, was created by a system that does not permit the experience of decision making by younger members, the experience that hones them for eventual assumption of top leadership. Hence, they continue to operate on untested, sometimes naive assumptions about people and events.

The imponderables in looking at present and future PAVN leadership greatly outweigh our total sum of knowledge. The frank truth is that when the generational transfer of power is made in PAVN, it will bring into positions of command almost totally unknown figures. In summary, then, PAVN leadership can be said to be unique. It was composed of men of implacable determination, indifferent to reverses and failures, extremely self-confident (some would say fanatic) with total faith in themselves, their chosen strategy, and their cause. They were opposed, it is true, by a foe often characterized by general irresolution and cross-purpose, but nonetheless they won the final test, which at root seems to have been the result of sheer willpower. If the individual top leaders were less than adequate, they were compensated for by a system of collective decision making that made up for their shortcomings—an acknowledgment of the observation ascribed to Mao Tse-tung that in real life we cannot ask for “ever-victorious” generals. The central reason for their success, then, was the system and not the leadership, a system with an appealing vision of ethnolinguistic unity, a system able to organize, mobilize, and motivate the people of Vietnam and hammer them into the weapon called people’s war, then instill a discipline that withstood the enormous forces ranged against it. Perhaps in the final resolve—based on what happened later in Kampuchea—we should conclude that it was a historical conjuncture or accident that never happened before and will never happen again.

Notes—Chapter 8

1. Le Duan, "Political Report to the Fifth Party Congress," *Tap Chi Cong San*, no. 4, 1982.
2. The rank of PAVN senior colonel appears comparable to that of brigadier or commodore as employed by nineteenth-century Western armies and navies, which were then replaced by brigadier general and captain. There is no rank of brigadier general in PAVN.
3. Nguyen Chi Thanh was promoted to senior general posthumously.
4. Also members of the 1960 NDC: Ho Chi Minh (Chairman), Pham Van Dong (Vice Chairman) (General Giap was also a Vice Chairman), Tran Quoc Hoan (Security), Nguyen Van Tran (Heavy Industry), and Tran Huu Duc (Food Production).
5. The National Defense Council during the war years consisted of Chairman Ton Duc Thang; two Vice Chairmen: Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap; and six members: General Song Hao, Tran Quoc Hoan (Minister of Interior), Nguyen Van Tran (Central Committee member), Nguyen Duy Trin (Foreign Affairs), Gen. Van Tien Dung, and Gen. Chu Van Tan.
6. Those who faded after the war included such once-prominent military figures as Maj. Gen. Tran Nam Trung, Maj. Gen. Le Can Chan, and Maj. Gen. Nguyen Van Ho.
7. In *Le Viet Minh*, Fall fixes PAVN at 350,000 in late 1954, which apparently includes some but not all of the paramilitary units; if not, his figure is high.
8. The PAVN officer corps at its peak in 1979 apparently was about 190,000 but was reduced during the year when overage officers were weeded out. The Hanoi press in late 1979 made frequent reference to the figure 50,000 as the number of PAVN officers who had been "demobilized, reassigned or transferred to the officer reserves" that year but did not make it clear how many of those actually left the service.
9. William Turley, "Origins and Development of Communist Military Leadership in Vietnam," *Armed Forces and Society*, 3, no. 2, Feb. 1977.
10. Fall, *Le Viet Minh*.
11. Melvin Gurtov, *Viet Cong Cadres and the Cadre System*, RAND Memorandum 5414, Dec. 1967. For a survey of methodologies used in analysis of Hanoi decision making, see Carlyle Thayer's "Three Revolutionary Currents: Vietnamese Perspectives on International Security," a paper read at an Australia National University conference, Apr. 1983.
12. Military training is given in all thirty-two colleges and senior vocational schools in Hanoi and in most of the eighteen vocational middle schools in the city, a pattern that probably is common throughout the

country. Students are organized along military lines into Self-Defense Force units. Other specialized military training schools operated in PAVN include: the William Pieck PAVN Technical College in Ho Chi Minh City, the PAVN Special Operations School near Haiphong, the Military Institute of Foreign Languages in Hanoi, the PAVN Anti-Aircraft Artillery School at Ba Hang Doi in Hao Binh province, the PAVN Political Cadre Institute at Tam Do in Vinh Phuc province, and a complex of "local military schools" operated by each military region command. PAVN combat training (supervised by the Combat Training Department within the PAVN General Staff) is done chiefly at the military region and corps level. Directives are prepared and reissued annually by the Ministry of Defense and Chief of General Staff and administered by the Combat Training Department, which also holds special short courses in training methods for commanders and staff, usually every year in June. It is clear that Kampuchea brought a "reform" to PAVN military training in which theory courses were replaced by "hands-on" training and greater emphasis on the practice of warfare and less on ideological explanations of it.

13. *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 28 Mar. 1983.

14. Vietnam News Agency, vol. 10, Oct. 1982.

15. These PAVN military journals themselves are, of course, a form of continuing officer training and education. The PAVN daily newspaper is *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* (People's Army). The monthly journal is *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan* (People's Army Journal, or Studies), edited by Col. Pham Quang Can, issued monthly since 1957. *Tap Chi Van Nghe Quan Doi* (People's Army Literary Journal) was founded in Jan. 1957 as successor to the earlier *Sinh Hoat Van Nghe*, founded in 1952, and is the armed forces "arts and literature journal." According to its twenty-fifth anniversary publication in 1977 *Tap Chi Van Nghe Quan Doi* had published 5,696 articles, 2,692 poems, 561 pieces of music, and 1,280 art and literary criticisms. In addition, there are a number of specialized military journals, the most important of which probably is the PAVN General Rear Services Directorate organ, *Economy and Technology*. Many of these publications are available for consultation at the University of California Indochina Archive, University of California at Berkeley.

16. A rather candid detailing of this issue as it revolves around the computer is found in *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Oct. 1982, in an article entitled "Several Matters Concerning Automated Command Operations" by Capt. Le Tu Thanh, apparently a navy captain who, in effect, says it is impossible to run a modern army today without advanced technology. His tone indicates that many of his compatriots disagree.

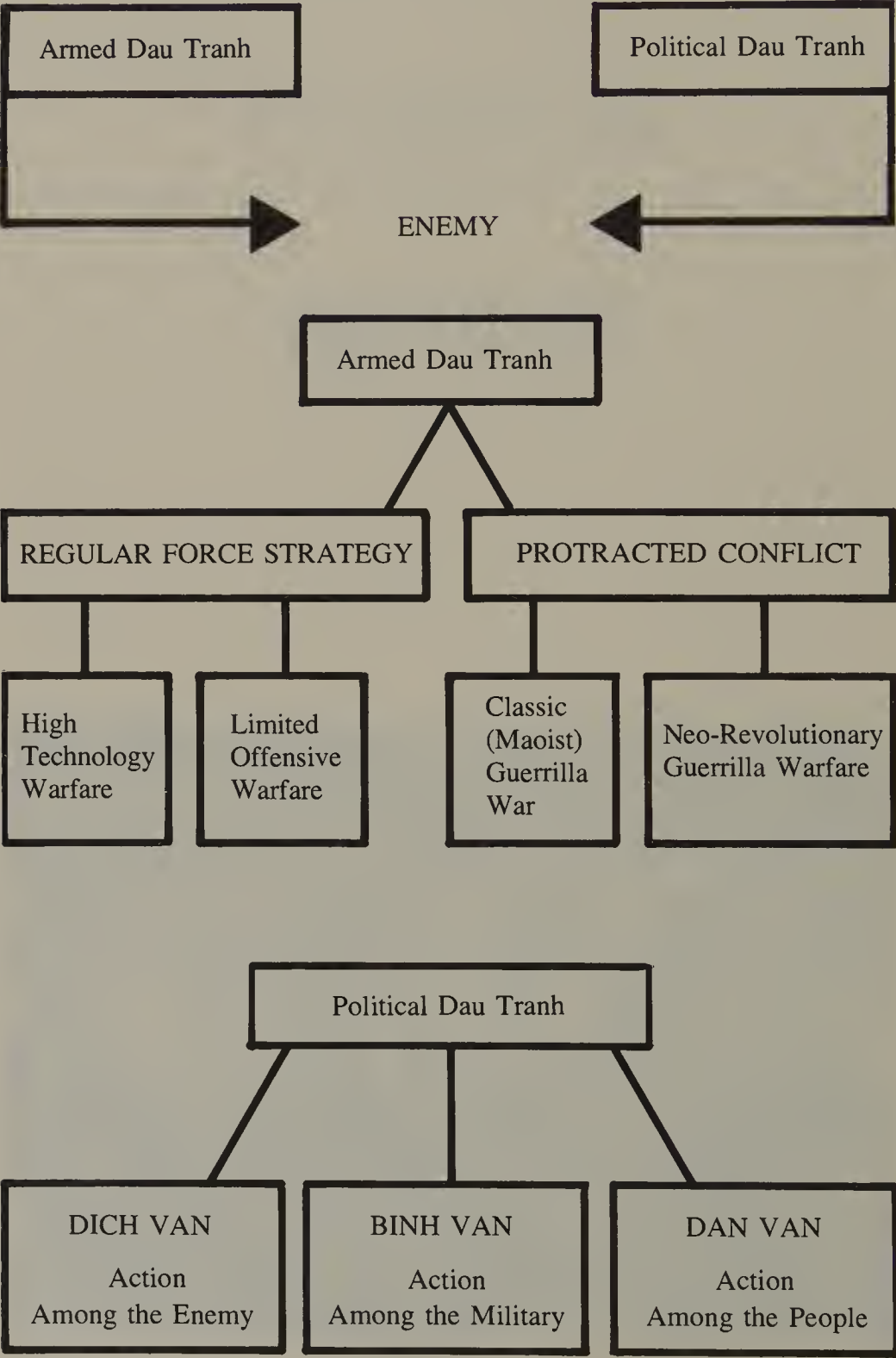
17. Military journal articles in the 1980s tend to take a proprofessional attitude, but it probably is dangerous to make conclusions based on such writings. Most of the articles are written by those in the expert faction; the reds seem less vocal, but that does not mean they are less influential or that professionalism at the expense of ideology is an issue that has been put to rest.
18. Gen. Hoang Van Thai, "Officer Training and Development," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, June 1982; see also same publication Sept. 1982.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Nhan Dan*, 3 Dec. 1982.
21. There has been a PAVN reserve-officer system of sorts since the 1960s but what can be termed a true reserve-officer corps only since 1981. Full implementation did not begin until the issuing of Council of Ministers Decree 153/HDBT, 8 Sept. 1982 (carried by Vietnam News Agency 4 Oct. 1982), "Regulations Governing PAVN Officer Reserve System." See also *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* editorial, "Training Reserve Officers," 6 May 1981.
22. *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 4 Oct. 1982.
23. General Thai, "Officer Training and Development."
24. Text carried in *Luat Hoc*, July–Sept. 1982.
25. General Thai, "Officer Training and Development."
26. For high-level evaluation of the officer corps training-reform program, see Maj. Gen. Duong Han, "Striving to Improve Educational Quality in the Army's School System," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Sept. 1984. (FBIS *Asia and Pacific Daily Report*, 10 Oct. 1984.)

SECTION IV

Strategy



Schematic of Vietnamese Communist Revolutionary War



CHAPTER 9

Why the Communists Won: Military Dau Tranh

The thesis of this section is that the Vietnamese communists conceived, developed, and fielded a dimensional new method for making war; that in forty years they honed this method into a brilliantly innovative strategy that proved singularly successful against three of the world's great powers; and, most important, that it is a strategy for which *there is no known proven counterstrategy*. Chapters 9 and 10 describe the strategy, and, incidentally, explain why Hanoi won the Vietnam War.

It is not greatly overstating the case to say that the past two decades have revolutionized the conduct of war, that we are today as far from, say, World War I as that war was from the Crusades. Mainly this revolution is due to technology, symbolized by the computer, the helicopter, advanced communication techniques, and the enormous augmentation of firepower. The effect of this revolution has been to enlarge the dimension of warfare and plunge today's professional soldier, perhaps unfairly, into the nether world that lies between war and politics. This, of course, applies only to nonnuclear war. Of nuclear war it can be said: warfare in our lifetime not only has been revolutionized, it has been rendered absurd. No sane person, regardless of social grievance, ideological passion, or perceived national interest, can counsel nuclear war. We are fortunate, I believe, that the impossibility of nuclear war is recognized by the leaders of all the world's governing systems and that, whatever may be their rationalization—horror of nuclear war, a sense of its ultimate immorality, or the pragmatic realization that there can be no winner—they daily act on the basis of this recognition. Paradoxically, this condition into which we have inadvertently blundered—to become hostages of nuclear warfare, prisoners in a balance of

terror—has delivered up a remarkably stable condition of world peace as far as generalized war is concerned. At the end of World War II the conventional wisdom, and not only that of cynical Europeans, was that the time span between world wars was growing steadily shorter, that the next one could be expected to begin about 1960. However, we have had nearly forty years without world war, and there is every prospect, I believe, that the peace will continue.

Overview

Genius, it is said, is the ability to synthesize. The great geniuses of history—Newton, Freud, Einstein—contributed little new knowledge to their respective fields. They had instead the rare ability to take what was already known and synthesize it—by seeing relationships and connections no one else noticed—into a field theory or new coherent whole, obvious to all once it was stated. If they were fortunate, it was because their advent was not premature, for this sort of intellectual breakthrough can come only at the correct stage of development.

Something of this same phenomenon was at work with Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap in the field of military strategy. They pushed along a developmental trend in warfare. They invented nothing, discovered nothing, but they synthesized what had been learned about war and politics. They were fortunate in their timing for they were in the right place at the right time.¹

The era of Napoleon Bonaparte was the start of this process. He is generally credited with (or blamed for) the invention of the modern concept of nationalism and its application to warfare, the idea of a conscript army that identifies with and fights for a geographically bounded area called the nation-state. Before Napoleon, warfare was in the hands of the professional mercenary who fought for his liege lord and his liege lord's purpose, be it territory or revenge or a buried god's tomb. Combat was his occupation, spoils were his reward. Since his life was continuous warfare, he assessed prospective battle by coolly calculating the odds. He could believe that "he who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day" was not a coward's rationalization but common sense. Napoleon fielded the first true nation-state army, cemented together not by loot or blood or Heaven's reward, but

by an abstraction of geography, fought by men who could afford high-risk unconditional surrender war, for soon they would return to less-dangerous civilian pursuits. Napoleon took war out of the hands of the cautious professional soldier and put it into the hands of the rash and unrestrained civilian. Invention of the citizen-soldier blurred the division of military and civilian, not only between military and civilian-in-uniform, but among all civilians. Almost incidentally during this process warfare became ever broader, then finally unlimited. With the advent of saturation bombing by high-altitude planes in World War II, civilians became legitimate targets as well as major participants. The rhetoric of that war, on both sides, deplored the killing of civilians, and dispatches always insisted that only military targets were struck, but the fact was that with such mass weapons it was impossible to separate combatant from bystander.

The Vietnamese communists erased entirely the line between military and civilian by ruling out the notion of noncombatant. Their strategy precluded, by definition, the disinterested onlooker. Not even children were excluded—particularly not children, one might say. All people became weapons of war—that is the meaning of the strategy—and all are expendable as any weapon is expendable in war. It had been foreshadowed by André Malraux in *The Conquerors*:

During the Commune, a fellow who was arrested cried:

“But I never dabbled in politics.”

“Precisely!”

And his head was broken.

Terminology

In order to appreciate this strategy—indeed, even to understand it—the reader is asked to learn a little Vietnamese. A few terms that simply defy translation without distortion will be defined briefly here and will become clear as we proceed:

Dau tranh (struggle), which in Vietnamese, it must be understood, is a powerful, highly emotional term.

Dau tranh vu trang (armed struggle), one of the two basic forms of *dau tranh*, which can also be thought of as “violence program.”

Dau tranh chinh tri (political struggle), which might be termed "politics with guns" and consists of three *van* (action) programs.

Dich van (action among the enemy) program (meaning non-military activities among the population controlled by the enemy, that is, in South Vietnam or in the United States).

Dan van (action among the people) program (meaning administration and other activities in the "liberated area").

Binh van (action among the military) program (meaning nonmilitary actions among the enemy's troops), originally *binh van-chinh van* (B and C program), *chinh* being "civil servant."

We are dealing here with a new concept of military strategy, vastly different from earlier concepts that appear to be, or are, superficially similar. These include the idea of irregular troops operating behind an enemy line; or civil war which is between two sides under the same government and thus purely internal; or rebellion, which is hostile antigovernment action in which the issue is quickly settled; or bandit warfare that is a way of life; or partisan warfare, which is supportive armed fighting by light troops. Elements of *dau tranh* strategy can be found in early communist revolutionary activity, for instance, in Lenin's minimum-program technique. Nor is it exclusively communist, as evidenced by the Hagana in Palestine and the Irish Republican Army.

Various writers dealing with Vietnamese communist strategy have used various terms, *revolutionary war* being perhaps the most common, although *people's war* also is widely employed. Hanoi historians do not use the term *dau tranh* strategy (although they embrace the concept), tending rather to classify warfare into three types: general war, limited war, and wars of national liberation. The third type is also frequently described as a category-three war, an anti-imperialist war, a special war (the 1962–65 period in Vietnam), and, most popular of all until Hanoi's breach with China, *people's war*.²

The two elements of the strategy—political *dau tranh* and armed *dau tranh*—are the jaws of the pincers used to attack the enemy, PAVN recruits are told at their initial indoctrination sessions. Or the two kinds of *dau tranh* are pictured as hammer and anvil. Always, it is stressed, the two operate together, must operate together. The dualism of *dau tranh* is bedrock dogma. Neither can be successful alone, only when combined—the marriage

of violence to politics—can victory be achieved. As explained to new recruits, *armed dau tranh* is the revolutionary violence program, that is, military actions and other forms of bloodletting. Political *dau tranh*'s programs or activities are threefold, what are called the *van* (action) programs (explained below), and are not, it is stressed, mere politics as that term is used elsewhere, not even politics with guns. Rather, *political dau tranh* means systematic coercive activity that involves motivation, social organization, communication of ideas, and mobilization of manpower and support.

The pincers of *dau tranh* close on the enemy. They represent the complete strategy. All actions taken in war—military attack or guerrilla ambush, propaganda broadcast or official statement at the conference table, every mission abroad, every decision taken from the Party cell in the village to the Politburo in Hanoi—all come within the scope and framework of the two *dau tranhs*. There is nothing else.

This concept is drilled into every PAVN recruit in basic training, and he is reminded of it at indoctrination sessions throughout his military career. It may strike the Westerner as esoteric, but it is second nature to the ordinary Vietnamese soldier.

To appreciate the strategy it is necessary to understand what *dau tranh* means to the PAVN soldier. The standard translation into English is "struggle" or "struggle movement," which, although technically correct, is inadequate and therefore misleading. The word *struggle* in English connotes physical labor dealing with some difficult matter, with or without success; floundering about; mired; whereas *dau tranh* in Vietnamese is commanding, awesome, magnetic. For the PAVN soldier, *dau tranh* is both mechanism and energizer and one of the most golden words in his vocabulary. A PAVN defector I interviewed told me, "*Dau tranh* is all important to a revolutionary. It shapes his thinking, fixes his attitudes, dictates his behavior. His life, his revolutionary work, his whole world is *dau tranh*."³

In the hands of skilled agit-prop cadres *dau tranh* becomes the siren call of consecration, the summons to noble duty, the promise of eventual utopia. It can play psychologically on a variety of emotions—hatred, ambition, commitment, grievance, and revenge. For the true believer, *dau tranh* explains the unexplain-

able. It offers a larger-than-life portrait of his meager contribution to the cause. What matters if he is engaged only in some mundane activity, as a bearer say, for in doing so he acts out his dedication to the spirit of *dau tranh*.

There is another concept concerning *dau tranh* strategy that must be noted in this semantic survey. It is the term *uprising*, of which there are many kinds, but only one of interest to us here, *khoi nghia* (general uprising). As a generic term, *uprising* can be defined as a truculent militant mass political action, either scattered piecemeal geographically or as a broad single ubiquitous entity. It is both verb and noun. *Uprising* can be either temporary or continuous, either a brief flash of action or a drawn-out activity. It is both a semipermanent institution and a decisive development.⁴ The least significant form is the *concerted uprising*, an orchestrated effort involving a fairly large area, say, part of a district, which results in the exclusion of the local government, at least temporarily. Midway on the scale is the military *offensive and uprising*, much more ambitious and involving at least an entire region. The highest form of interest here is the *khoi nghia* (general uprising). An example of it in the Vietnam War, although it was abortive, was the 1968 Tet Offensive. In all forms of *uprising* there is a dual image. It is pictured both as spontaneous behavior by people no longer able to contain their spirit of revolution, and it is considered to be a deliberate strategy, the culmination of systematic, intensive organizational and motivational work. In *khoi nghia* the revolutionary consciousness of the people has been gradually raised through use of the *dau tranh* strategy to the point where it explodes in a great human spontaneous combustion, which, like a forest fire, consumes all before it. The people rise up energized. The enemy's army shatters. The old society crumbles. The people seize power.

As used in *dau tranh* strategy, *khoi nghia* is a social myth in the Sorelian use of that term,⁵ clearly traceable to Sorel's myth of the General Strike, the notion that some day all the workers of the world will simultaneously launch a general strike, bringing all industry, transportation, society itself to a standstill; then the workers will simply pick up the controls of power. *Khoi nghia* is the General Strike in an agrarian setting. It also owes something to the French Revolution's Paris commune and to the Shanghai

commune of the 1920s. The Party, in fighting both the Viet Minh and the Vietnam wars, needed *khôi nghĩa* or some social myth to capture Vietnamese imagination, to heighten revolutionary consciousness and rouse the peasant to battle. Without the vision of *khôi nghĩa* there could be no militancy. Whether a general uprising would ever become reality was irrelevant, what mattered was that people were willing to act out their lives as if it were reality. The concept of *uprising* thus is more than plan or article of faith. It is a mystique. Its great utility is that it is easily grasped, is plausible, and cannot be disproved.

There is a final concept that we must note, having to do with the temporal dimension. In theory, at least, *dau tranh* strategy is applicable in a short intensive war in which victory is sought within a few months. More realistically, however, it must be deliberately protracted, drawn out in time. As Ho Chi Minh wrote mystically of it:

Time is the condition to be won to defeat the enemy. In military affairs time is of prime importance. Time ranks first among the three factors necessary for victory, coming before terrain and support of the people. Only with time can we defeat the enemy.⁶

Protracted conflict has several advantages. It allows time to be used as a trade-off for superior enemy size and strength. It creates in the enemy camp a sense of endlessness, of conflict going on year after year without resolution or apparent hope of victory. This in turn generates a secondary effect in which the *fact* of protracted conflict, rather than the issue of war itself, becomes the chief destructive force at work, eroding fundamental virtues and values such as loyalty, integrity, and honor, without which a society cannot exist. Externally, protracted conflict obscures the world's understanding of what is going on—social pathology as a way of life—and makes for easy manipulation of external perception. Aggression is not seen as aggression but as liberation. Incumbent government measures become not normal self-protection but offensive and somehow illegitimate actions, and the incumbent is held solely responsible for contributing to the protraction of the conflict.

Obviously, special dedication is required of participants in

protracted conflict. A soldier living in a mangrove swamp, away from family, with poor food and little medical care, must have strong character to maintain faith in the fifty-year-war concept. Considerable and persistent indoctrinational efforts are required to imbue him with a spirit of sacrifice, an attitude of self-reliance, and the ability to accept strong discipline and develop great self-discipline. Each military unit must have a well-oiled mechanism that can intensify and reinforce faith in the idea that time is on its side. In actual practice, however, PAVN agit-prop cadres during the Vietnam War tended to downplay the fifty-year-war prospect among rank-and-file troops in favor of one that said victory was over the next hill, that, backed by the cause, they merely had to hang on and the enemy would collapse. This was not frequently an unrealistic perception. Beginning in mid-1968, agit-prop cadres had little difficulty in persuading troops that the enemy was going to quit momentarily; indeed, many on the other side during that period thought the same thing. What is important, of course, mandatory even, is to convince the other side that you mean to fight a protracted conflict and have the will and the capability to do so. Even if you are patently unable to fight a fifty-year war, you must never let the enemy realize that.

Psychological Dimension

If the Vietnamese strategic concept of *dau tranh* were to be defined in one phrase it would be "the people as instrument of war." The mystique surrounding it involves the organization, mobilization, and motivation of people, all the people. The sequence of implementation is (1) control the people, (2) forge them into a weapon, then (3) hurl the weapon into battle. Those locked in combat understand the proxy nature of the people as instrument of war. Only outsiders are confused as to who is fighting whom or what the fight is all about.

The strategy of *dau tranh* is political in the way that any revolution is political. Violence is necessary to it but is not its essence. The goal is to seize power by disabling the society, using special means, chiefly organizational. In fact, organization is the great god of *dau tranh* strategy and counts for more than ideology or military tactics. The basic instrument is a united front, an organization of organizations, casting a vast web over the peo-

ple, enmeshing them. These organizations become channels of communication, which is their primary use; and they make rational appeals to self-interest, which are shored up by other organizational instruments of coercion. Through organization, mobilization becomes possible. With mobilization, and only then, comes motivation. The trinity is forged. The people, now organized, mobilized, and motivated, are set against their own society to drain it of its coherent strength. *Dau tranh* strategy engenders a war of competing systems of organization. In the end victory goes to the side that gets the best organized, stays the best organized, and can most successfully disorganize the other.

A totality surrounds this strategy quite unlike the narrower war that preceded it. It is no simple insurgency with a limited objective such as national independence or change of government or redress of grievance. Neither is it the usual revolutionary stirrings that reflect inadequate living standards, oppressive government, or some great inequity. Indeed, the *dau tranh* strategist shuns the legitimate grievance as being too unpredictably volatile; when he needs a grievance he manufactures one. Spontaneity of any sort is avoided in favor of the engineered timetable. Action comes from the central planner not from the heart. Since the goal is a totally new social order, this levies on the participant the demand of total involvement, total immersion. It touches all persons of the society at all points of their existence.

None of this should strike the reader as particularly strange or esoteric. While the terminology may be unfamiliar, the phenomenon of cultural revolution is not. In the 1960s we saw the spirit represented by *dau tranh* spread like wildfire across the world. It began as the search for social change by means of social confrontation and then escalated to politics with guns, bombs, kidnappings, and hijackings. The tactics employed by the new breed of political militant in America and elsewhere during the 1960s—the demonstration march, political kidnapping, the courtroom pseudodrama, the incident staged for benefit of television cameras, bombings to advertise the cause, the various techniques for riot manufacture and instigation of mob violence—all were known and used in the earliest days of the Vietnam War as part of the political-struggle movement. Militants in many lands came to emulate the romantic Viet Cong image and imitate the techniques

they pioneered. Whether deliberately copied or not, the struggle-movement notion spread. It created a new and murky world, wedged between orthodox politics and orthodox revolution, an arena neither war nor peace, neither rational social engineering nor forthright destruction of the existing social order. An entirely new dimension in social relations emerged, one whose godfather was the Vietnamese communist strategist.

Armed *Dau Tranh*

We are now ready to examine *dau tranh* strategy in detail. Our consideration is divided into three parts—an examination of armed *dau tranh*, of the connection between armed and political *dau tranh*, and of political *dau tranh*.

It would be a mistake to equate *dau tranh vu trang* (armed struggle) with ordinary military combat. Armed *dau tranh* does incorporate various military and quasi-military actions, also institutionalized assassination, kidnapping, and other activity not normally associated with the formal armed forces of a country. A more expressive translation of *dau tranh vu trang* would be “violence program.” That usage, for example, would closely fit the stated tasks assigned to the armed-struggle sector in the famed Party Plenum Resolution 15 (13 May 1959), which generally is credited with having, in effect, declared the start of the Vietnam War: “Armed *dau tranh* is to make the people rise up (in *Khoi nghia*), to lower the enemy’s prestige, to destroy the local (enemy) governmental administration, to establish (our) people’s government administrations where possible. . . .” Armed *dau tranh* always is cast in a political context, never evaluated in simple military terms. Its day-to-day activity can include military combat from ubiquitous guerrilla raids to tank assaults; ambushes, harassing fire, sapper-team assaults, destruction of roads, canals, and harbor facilities, also such violence as assassinations, kidnappings, and systematic, selective terror.

In conceptual terms armed *dau tranh* is vague, amorphous, and given to endless interpretation. Understandably then, PAVN High Command thinking over the years was not in terms of a single generalized doctrine but a series of finite, precise, strategic-tactical variants. The great classic debate, which engendered permanent factionalism at the Politburo level, had to do

with the balance between armed and political *dau tranh*. Its basic components were these:

1. In allocation of resources, particularly manpower, what should be the guideline for the division between armed and political *dau tranh*? How many sappers and how many agit-prop cadres should be trained? Send organizers into Saigon or a rocket barrage? Resources should be divided, yes, but what division?
2. On whose side is time? How protracted should conflict be to serve you better than it does the enemy? What are the unintended effects of drawing out the war?
3. Considering the circumstances, which is the best approach: incremental increase in the tempo of war making or maximum linear application of force? Should warfare build, as they say in the theater, or should military prowess be applied as massive sustained pressure?

In the long years of the Vietnam War these and other issues were debated endlessly within the communist camp. Various answers and mixes of answers were supplied, tried, and, when they failed, replaced by new answers.

The armed *dau tranh* strategy and tactics employed in the early years, up to 1965, were what might be called orthodox, based on the Viet Minh War experience and the Chinese revolution. An examination of some fifty captured diaries and notebooks containing notes taken by PLAF troops during indoctrination and training sessions (most of them circa 1959–62), indicate the substantive texture of armed *dau tranh* at the time. Essentially it was a *mélange* of military maxims and semipolitical aphorisms by Vietnamese and Chinese revolutionaries.

Much of the character of armed *dau tranh* strategy early in the Vietnam War derived from the Chinese Three-Stage Guerilla War concept. Although never exactly implemented in Vietnam, chiefly because elements of it had been rendered obsolete by advances in military technology (such as the helicopter), Three-Stage Guerrilla War remained a prism through which PAVN generals viewed the war and for that reason is important in understanding their thinking. The three stages essentially are categories of development expressed in static-dynamic, military-political, offensive-defensive terms. During Stage One the guerrilla

hits, runs, and hides. His enemy seeks to find and destroy him. This is the period of vital but mundane effort to build the revolutionary machine. Cadres in remote areas create a hard core of armed propaganda terms. These fan out to adjacent villages to recruit, train, and develop local guerrilla bands to operate in their home-village vicinity. Later in the stage these village units are upgraded and combined into larger fighting forces. The liberated area is created, defined as those portions of the country administratively but not necessarily militarily denied to the government. Basic tactics in Stage One rest on the principles of constant activity for its own sake, incisive, if infrequent, offensive raids, and great mobility. The stage requires continual alertness and is directly influenced by terrain, weather, intelligence, and communication within the system. It seeks to decimate the enemy army piecemeal, weaken then eliminate the government's administrative control of the countryside, and block counterefforts such as the various pacification programs. At all costs the guerrilla bands must be kept intact. Pitched battles are avoided. The ambush is highly favored since it offers the guerrilla maximum initiative and permits him to select the time, place, and duration of combat. Like a swarm of irate hornets around an unprotected man, the guerrillas dart and sting and dart away. Stage One never can be decisive, but it is the vital moment of creation, the heroic time of ordeal in the fires of hopeless combat. It is the myth-building phase in which heroes are created and legends written.

Stage Two seeks equalization as equilibrium develops between the two sides and often is called the equilibrium stage. It is a dynamic and hazardous period, full of promise. Great activity is expected. The rule of conserving strength at all cost gives way to *van dong chien* (war of movement), vicious attrition designed to bleed the enemy. As the stage progresses the incumbent increasingly becomes defensive. He ceases active opposition in favor of consolidating what he has left and retreats to urban enclaves on the coast. The smell of defeat hangs over these enclaves. Guerrilla spirit soars. Government abandonment of the countryside enables the guerrilla to rapidly build his strength in men and materiel. The war escalates. Battles are larger and more frequent. Regiments and even divisions appear; the war becomes less guerrilla-like and resembles a conventional small-scale war.

The phase is mobile, not only in terms of movement, but in the sense of fluidity. The war flows in well-timed, carefully integrated waves of power. Political *dau tranh* hammers at the government's psychological ties with the people, the physical ties already largely cut by military action.

Stage Three, sometimes called the fortified position attack stage, or the counteroffensive stage, marks the beginning of the end. The war loses much of its ideological cast and becomes more a matter of pure military force. The incumbent, back to the wall, fights an all-out defensive battle. Eventually, if the war goes the whole distance of the Third Stage, full, orthodox, limited war develops. The battle is between armies of troops, and in the battle is the decision.

Three-Stage Guerrilla War does not actually describe either the Chinese Communist Revolution or the Viet Minh War, but since it is affective rather than explicit, the concept can be and is employed by Vietnamese military historians. Use of this framework was common in early writings but largely ceased after 1965 when it was recognized, and tacitly admitted, that a decade of military research and development had outmoded many of the military, but not the political, techniques of Three-Stage Revolutionary Guerrilla War.

One important characteristic of this type of guerrilla war that appears to have survived and endured the technological revolution has to do with deception. Some military experts would argue it is the *only* characteristic that is noteworthy. Vietnam's history is rampant with examples of deception and trickery—a Saigon intellectual once remarked to me that the history of Vietnam could be written in terms of the double cross—and, in effect, it has become institutionalized. In eleventh-century Vietnam, an armed force properly was considered to consist of three armies: the “real” army (*Chinh Binh*), which was the overt military force; the “hidden” army (*Ky Binh*), which was covert, invisible, guerrilla-like; and the “phantom” army (*Nghi Binh*), which didn't exist at all but which any good general could make his enemy believe in so as to dishearten and intimidate him. From this has stemmed the conviction that victory often goes to the side best able to hide its internal difficulties and maintain an appearance of equanimity to the outside world.

With the arrival of American and other Allied ground troops in Vietnam in 1965, General Giap and his High Command were obliged to restructure the conduct of armed *dau tranh* strategy. They produced a variant that they termed Regular Force Strategy.⁷ General Giap's problem, as he saw it, was to find a way to bypass the admitted advantage the Americans enjoyed in terms of mass (mass of men, massive firepower) and movement (particularly the mobility provided by the helicopter). Briefly, Giap's answer was to develop two armed *dau tranh* tactics, or what he called "fighting methods" (*cach danh*). The first was the occasional small military blockbuster that he labeled the "coordinated fighting method" (*cach danh hop dong*), a medium-sized attack against a relatively important target, an enemy battalion headquarters, for instance. The essence of its success lies in its being perfectly planned and flawlessly executed. The target is destroyed with surgical precision, and the impact on the enemy is not military so much as psychological. The second tactic General Giap termed the "independent fighting method" (*cach danh doc lap*), sometimes the "gnat-swarm technique." This involves mounting dozens of daily small-scale actions, no single one being important but cumulatively raising the enemy's anxiety level and destroying his self-confidence. High casualties can be taken, and attacks need not be entirely victorious so long as they pin down the enemy and reduce his initiatives. Then the two techniques are combined—timing in this appears to be a matter of intuition—into a single intensive campaign in which military activity steadily escalates into a "comprehensive offensive." At its peak there is delivered the final psychological capper, what might be called the Dien Bien Phu gambit, a massive assault on some politically or psychologically important target, which, when captured, destroys the enemy's will to continue warfare.

This armed *dau tranh* formula was pursued relentlessly for three years and reached its purest form in the 1967–68 Winter–Spring Campaign, heart of which (as an independent fighting method) was the 1968 Tet Offensive.⁸ The campaign may have been a political *dau tranh* victory—it did bring down the President of the United States—but for General Giap it was a military disaster. When the dust settled after Tet it was clear that this form of armed *dau tranh* was far too costly to sustain. The same

lesson was learned again and again throughout the remainder of the war, with respect to the American armed forces at least. Indeed, the historic fact to emerge was that the U.S. Army during its entire stay, from 1965 to 1973, did not lose a single important battle. It was a record unparalleled in the history of modern warfare.

Had the Vietnam War been another conventional war, had it been decided on the basis of past wars, it would have been over by mid-1968 with the defeat of the communist forces. However, it was not such an old-fashioned war, but a singularly new kind fought under what might be called unfair rules. If the incumbent force—the South Vietnamese and their allies—is defeated by armed *dau tranh*, it loses the war; but if it defeats armed *dau tranh*, it does not win the war. To win it has to defeat both armed *dau tranh* and political *dau tranh*. The insurgent force can lose in armed *dau tranh* and still not lose the war—it merely falls back in temporary stalemate. Thus it was that had the Americans lost their battles, they would have lost the war, but having won all their battles, they did not win the war.

The failure of the 1967–68 Winter–Spring Campaign, of which the 1968 Tet Offensive was such a prominent part, ruined General Giap's variant of armed *dau tranh*. After a hiatus of several months, marked by a good deal of doctrinal experimentation, there emerged a new form of armed *dau tranh*, here termed Neo-Revolutionary Warfare, or the so-called superguerrilla concept. Although largely discredited, the lure of orthodox *dau tranh* lingered on with many Vietnamese communists, particularly southerners, fed by very attractive mystique. A corps of faithful doctrinaires believed that what was required was not abandonment of the initial strategy, but adaptation. The doctrine they devised diverged from the earlier orthodox armed *dau tranh* in a number of ways, the key one perhaps being the assertion that victory can be achieved at Stage Two of guerrilla war and need never go on to Stage Three, thus avoiding the condition that creates concentration of forces against which the enemy can bring his massive firepower. Assertion that victory could be won at Stage Two represented a sharp break with past thinking, particularly that of Chairman Mao Tse-tung and Lin Piao, who viewed it not only as erroneous but heretical.

This form of armed *dau tranh*, as practiced in the 1968–72 period, did have much to recommend it on the battlefields of Vietnam. Seeking victory at the gnat-swarm stage shunted aside the enemy's vaunted advantage of mass and movement. It lowered the guerrilla's profile, cut his casualties, lessened the strain on his entire system. The strategy did not attempt to match the enemy's strength and seek later to slug it out with him toe-to-toe; rather it sought to deprive him of significant targets. It would not mass forces and frequently would refuse a fixed battle, demonstrating the now well-established fact that it is nearly impossible to force an army to stand and fight if it does not want to do so. And it provided adequate doctrinal explanation for the faithful, extremely important among Vietnamese communists.

Top priority during this period was given to creating a new kind of military unit, the wide-ranging, well-trained sapper or commando team. The press at the time labeled it the "super-guerrilla," a term not entirely inaccurate. Gone was the guerrilla in black pajamas, fighting in his home region with homemade or captured weapons. In his place came a new fighting man, organized into a highly skilled team as well knit as a professional football squad, proficient in the best weapons and explosive devices the communist world could produce, linked to higher headquarters with sophisticated communication equipment, striking sudden deadly blows that would neatly destroy medium-sized enemy installations. These attacks bypassed the enemy's advantage of fire power (he often had nothing to fire at) and his mobility (even a quick heliborne reinforcement arrived too late). The purpose was not to decimate the enemy's military force but to occupy it, wear it out, limit its initiative. Other forms of armed *dau tranh* continued during this time—a reflection of the doctrinal division within the PAVN High Command. There were, for example, various types of frontal military assaults, either singly or grouped in what were called "military high points."

The main argument against the sapper team form of armed *dau tranh* was that it was a no-win strategy. True, it would cut losses and permit survival, but because of its very design it never would generate the momentum to victory. Its tactics might form a useful adjunct for big units in battle, but low-level military ac-

tivity by itself could not carry the burden of the war. Other opposition came from the PAVN political generals, those more attuned to diplomatic and psychological considerations. Their strongest argument was the temporal one—that in drawing out the war in time, the enemy was served as much as the guerrilla. But it proved to be a useful interim strategy. The tempo of war dropped to only a fraction of the daily military activity of the previous period, and this provided precious time.

General Giap, it was evident afterwards, spent the period from 1968 to 1971 devising still another variant of armed *dau tranh*, one that would rectify earlier shortcomings. It could be called a high-technology armed *dau tranh* strategy and was unveiled in the 1972 Easter Offensive. Basically it sought to match the enemy in military technology, and in fact, that was done. In the offensive, PAVN tanks outnumbered ARVN tanks, and PAVN had more long-range artillery than ARVN. PAVN also had significant anti-aircraft capability in the South for the first time, but that never was fully tested. It was a well-planned campaign and well calculated in terms of risk. It was defeated because air power prevented massing of forces and because of stubborn, even heroic, South Vietnamese defense. Terrible punishment was visited on PAVN troops and on the PAVN transportation and communication matrix. PAVN forces could not mass sufficiently in front of Hue because of devastating air strikes. PAVN's line from Kontum to the sea, which cut the country in half, could not be held. And, most important, ARVN troops and even local forces stood and fought as never before. An Loc—probably the single most important battle in the war—held, and with its holding went General Giap's hope for a knock-out blow.

The Paris Agreements were signed, and the Vietnamese communist theoreticians returned to their drafting boards to revise and amend their strategy. Two years later they returned, essentially with the same strategy, but with reequipped and retrained forces. A limited-objective campaign was launched in early 1975. For reasons not yet clear—but which are a tribute to political *dau tranh*—that campaign triggered the sudden disintegration of ARVN. The army that had fought so well against such a strong force in 1972, didn't fight at all against a lesser force in 1975. A

local communist offensive against Ban Me Thout, a relatively unimportant military target in the Highlands, began a chain reaction largely characterized not by a series of battles but by ARVN disintegration. PAVN units gingerly moved from one military vacuum to another until the last vacuum of all—Saigon. The war ended, not with a bang, but a whimper.

Notes—Chapter 9

1. The literature of the field for Vietnamese communist military doctrine and strategy, as noted earlier, is surprisingly sparse. Contributions have been made by the RAND Corporation (classified works mostly), and good but limited work has been done by William Turley, M. C. Conley, Patrick McGarvey, Robert O'Neill, and George Tanham. Some treatment is afforded in works on revolutionary guerrilla warfare in the writings of Samuel Griffith, Brian Crozier, Robert B. Asprey. Vietnamese communist generals and other figures in Hanoi have written profusely about warfare over the years, but little of it is analytical or even explanatory; such as has been written has largely been confined to articles in military journals (many of which are listed in the bibliography). The most important figure, of course, is Vo Nguyen Giap. Of his writings probably *National Liberation War in Vietnam: General Line, Strategy and Tactics* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1971), was the most useful in preparing this chapter since it is his most lucid explanation of the concept of *dau tranh*. His most recent significant work (and perhaps his last) was a long article, "People's War in the New Era of National Defense," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, May 1979. See also list of writings of Gen. Van Tien Dung in the bibliography. See also entries for Gen. Nguyen Chi Thanh, Truong Ching, and Le Duan.
2. People's war, as developed in China, resembled the strategy that emerged in Vietnam, but the Vietnamese communists did not root the struggle in the rural area in the same exclusive way as did the Chinese. Nor did they endorse the Chinese principle of self-reliance, but required assistance by allies. Finally the Vietnamese, certainly not General Giap, never accepted the Maoist argument about the superiority of human over material strength, the people as a spiritual atom bomb, as Mao Tse-tung phrased it.
3. For a discussion of the philosophical agony that the concept of *dau tranh* represented for early Vietnamese nationalists and revolutionaries steeped in Confucian thought and influenced by Buddhism, see David Marr's *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial: 1920-45*, pp. 295-99, on social Darwinism coming to Vietnam.
4. The idea of *uprising* in translation causes a good deal of linguistic confusion. The progression of political action in this sphere logically would be uprising, rebellion, revolt, insurrection, and revolution. *Uprising* would be the lowest order of activity and *revolution* the highest. While Hanoi theoreticians can accept the standard definition of *insurrection* and *revolution*, they cannot accept the standard definition of *uprising* since it connotes throwing off allegiance or overthrowing legitimate authority.

5. As used by Sorel, social myth does not convey falsity; rather it means a belief that may or may not be true, the important thing being that people are willing to act out their lives on the basis of it. His primary example of a social myth was the Second Coming of Christ, which so strongly motivated early Christians.
6. Ho Chi Minh, "Revising Working Methods," 1959, in *Collected Works*, Hanoi, 1970.
7. Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, *Big Victory, Great Task*.
8. The 1969 Tet Offensive actually was an integral part of the broader nine-month 1967–68 Winter–Spring Campaign. General Giap conceived this campaign to proceed in three phases: Phase I (Oct.–Dec. 1967) to consist of medium-sized *coordinated fighting methods*, battles up the mountainous spine of Vietnam (at Loc Ninh, Dak To, and Con Thien); Phase II (Jan.–Mar. 1968) was the famed Tet Offensive employing *independent fighting methods*; Phase III was to combine these two tactics and climax with a psychological capper, another Dien Bien Phu, code named "Second Wave." Second Wave never eventuated because the campaign was ruined in Phase II, may have been Hue, more probably was Khe Sanh.

CHAPTER 10

Why the Communists Won: Political *Dau Tranh*

The ice tongs of *dau tranh* strategy that seize the enemy have two arms. We have examined the first, armed *dau tranh*, and now turn to the second, political *dau tranh*. But first we must examine the coupling that makes the two arms into a single instrument, what could perhaps be called the hinge of *dau tranh* strategy.

The basic objective in *dau tranh* strategy is to put armed conflict into the context of political dissidence. Thus, while armed and political *dau tranh* may designate separate clusters of activity, conceptually they cannot be separated. *Dau tranh* is a seamless web. This concept is an immutable article of faith among all PAVN theoreticians, perhaps the only point on which they all can agree fully. The perfect yin-yang marriage of armed and political *dau tranh* exists, however, only among theoreticians. The practitioner, in the finite world of planning operations, constantly faces the task of the proper division of resources and the question of how much to the armed *dau tranh* and how much to the political *dau tranh*. Among PAVN leaders the matter of correct ratio, the proper mix of the two struggle methods, began as a difference of opinion over tactics and grew to an enormous debate that shaped and colored nearly all decisions subsequently taken during the war.

Maoist military thought, built around three-stage guerrilla war doctrine, holds that the balance between armed and political *dau tranh* varies with the stage of the war, generally with political *dau tranh* dominating day-to-day activities early in the war but gradually being overtaken by armed *dau tranh* activities. That was the pattern in both the Viet Minh and Vietnam wars. One way of measuring balance is in terms of personnel assignment, man-day expenditure of resource allocation (including manpower), then a

CADRE ASSIGNMENTS TO POLITICAL AND ARMED
DAU TRANH

Period	Estimated Number of Cadres	Political <i>Dau Tranh</i>	Armed <i>Dau Tranh</i>
1959–63	15,000–20,000	90%	10%
1965–68	35,000–40,000	60%	40%
1971–74	40,000–50,000	55%	45%

ratio can be fixed between political *dau tranh* and armed *dau tranh*. In South Vietnam in the 1959–63 period the ratio between political and armed was about 10:1. By late 1967 it had dropped to about 2:1. Another indication of the balance between the two activities could be found in cadre assignment. Thus, throughout the war, in terms of sheer volume of activity, political *dau tranh* far exceeded armed *dau tranh*, and that was precisely what made the Vietnam War unique.

After 1965 there developed a sharp division between Hanoi and China (and within China) over this connection or relationship of the two *dau tranh*s. The issue, as always, was balance, and it was argued in terms of resource allocation, priorities, and primacy of emphasis. In Vietnam doctrine never reached the sacred text level as in China, where Mao's dogma became sanctified and enshrined and then, when time had rendered much of it obsolete, triggered a reformation movement involving a bitter and obscure struggle between heretic and conformist. Hanoi theoreticians held that China regarded pursuit of the Vietnam War as possible along any of three lines: protracted conflict with emphasis on political *dau tranh*, a variant of protracted conflict that could be called political struggle-diplomatic strategy, or intensified regular-force strategy (primary emphasis on armed *dau tranh*). These theoreticians believed that China advocated the first of these, protracted conflict with emphasis on political *dau tranh*, because it most closely resembled the early Chinese model, because it minimized risk to China, and because it meant the least dependence on USSR military aid. Probably that assessment does not fairly represent the Chinese view, which seems to have been more

developmental than the Hanoi theoreticians were willing to concede.

The original Chinese view was that victory should come from the barrel of a gun as in Mao's famous aphorism: "The highest form of revolution is settlement of the issue by war. The central task of revolution is to seize power with armed force." Gradually, it seems clear, the Chinese came to regard this approach as too risky, *adventurism* was their term. Certainly it presented China with dilemmas in its support role. And it integrated USSR aid into the scheme of things, in fact, made such aid central to success. Thus Chinese thinking on the balance between armed and political *dau tranh* shifted toward the latter, including even the idea of a negotiated settlement. Probably the Chinese actually did believe in their doctrinal interpretation, that the correct practice of revolutionary war at that moment in history should be more political and less military. Unfortunately, since it is difficult to argue with success, Hanoi's opposite and victorious strategy effectively silenced the Chinese doctrinaires.

The pale shadow of this doctrinal struggle—whether to tilt toward armed or political *dau tranh*—within the PAVN High Command never became personified as in China. Firm positions were taken of course—Truong Chinh and Le Duan being the most apparent examples—but, even so, room was always left for latitude of interpretation. For example, while Truong Chinh was "Mr. Political Dau-tranh" one can find in the writings of Le Duan and General Giap passages that read as if Truong Chinh had dictated them. This was a function of the diffuseness and involuted nature of the basic argument. It is not to say that a great doctrinal dispute did not rage through the years, for it did. But it is to say that the issue was argued on merit and not canon (as in China) and that personal fortunes did not rise and fall on a particular outcome (as in the USSR).

In the pincer strategy of *dau tranh*, we have seen the first grasping jaw to be armed *dau tranh*, the violence program. We now take up consideration of the second jaw, the nonviolent (or semiviolent) dimension called *dau tranh chinh tri* (political *dau tranh*). It must be stressed at the outset that political *dau tranh* should not be thought of as politics, either Western or Asian style. Nor

can it be equated with militant political activism of the type that swept the United States and western Europe in the 1960s. It is sometimes loosely defined as politics with guns in that it can be coercive, but it is much more than that and, in the end, defies the phrase maker.

The essence of political *dau tranh*—and that which makes it unique from confrontational politics—is its three *van* (action among) programs. These convert abstraction into reality.

The first of these programs is called *dich van* (action among the enemy). Specifically, *dich van* means action among the people controlled by the enemy, that is, the “temporarily unliberated” areas. In the Vietnam War, *dich van* was that wide range of non-military activity directed primarily at progovernment South Vietnamese, and secondarily at Americans and others abroad. Essentially a technique for confrontation, in the hands of the *dich van* cadre it became a high art. Some activity was mass media based, for example: during the weekend surreptitiously placing leaflets in students’ desks in a provincial school; stopping cars along a main highway and taking passengers to a nearby woods to be lectured by an agit-prop cadre; floating a raft containing the effigies of President Lyndon Johnson and Madame Nho Dinh Nhu in obscene postures down a river, past a teeming market place; interpreting the war and world events for Radio Liberation broadcasts; creating systematic rumor campaigns; armed propaganda teams visiting villages to stage dramas that were part entertainment and part propaganda.

The chief *dich van* mechanism, however, was not mass media but the social movement used as a channel of communication. The basic device was the *struggle* movement, an immensely potent village-level method for denigrating the GVN and enlisting the support of antigovernment noncommunists. The struggle movement was of two types: (1) face-to-face struggle meeting (meeting for propaganda in depth), and (2) the coaxing struggle meeting (meeting for agitation in width).

The more common was the coaxing struggle meeting, which took many forms: a “far-from-the-enemy” struggle meeting, which began and ended within the village and had as its primary purpose raising the revolutionary consciousness of the individual villager; the “denunciation” (or misery-telling) struggle meeting di-

rected against certain villagers or local conditions to destroy local social patterns and to break existing social relationships; the people's convention and other types of ceremonial sessions for show purposes and for communicating a sense of social solidarity; and, most ubiquitous of all, the struggle demonstration that had as its basic purposes the building of confidence in solidarity and group action. The struggle demonstration (or "to the enemy lair" meeting) would either begin in a village and move *en train* to the district GVN office or local military post, or form outside a town or city government office. Its announced purpose normally would be some genuine local grievance (a child killed by an ARVN truck) or some generalized complaint (high taxes). The meeting did not actually seek to redress the grievance but to demonstrate to the individual Vietnamese participant the power that lay in organized mass action.

Instructions to *dich van* cadres ordered them never to deviate from two basic principles, which might be considered laws of the struggle movement. The first was that any struggle action required complete advance planning and total step-by-step control during its execution, with particular attention paid to curbing the exuberance of any participant who took the superficial view that the struggle movement was simply what it appeared to be, a group of people protesting a specific act or condition. Experienced Party cadres had only contempt for spontaneous mass political action, an emotional explosion over some genuine grievance, for instance, that led to a demonstration with no leadership and no predictable outcome. The second principle was what might be called the law of Party genesis: If the Party did not organize and control a struggle demonstration, it could never be sure of the outcome nor of who would benefit; hence, such demonstrations were to be avoided. The rule was: If it is not ours, we keep out of it. The rule explains the rationale behind what appeared to have been many opportunities missed by the communists: during the Vietnam War years, hundreds of mass political actions were staged—by Buddhists, Catholics, workers, students, veterans, women, soldiers, even National Assemblymen—without any discernible Communist Party involvement. Because they could not control the actions, the communists would not participate.

It is easy to dismiss *dich van* activity as either cynical exploi-

STRUGGLE MOVEMENT MEETINGS

Date	Number of Meetings	Total Attendance
1960–61	1,170	65,000
1962	44,000	1,800,000
1963	172,000	12,000,000
1964	2,000,000	28,000,000
1965	11,000,000	91,000,000

tation of honest grievance or callous manipulation of credulous dupes. Neither is precisely accurate. For the individual participant with genuine complaint there was, of course, perceived benefit. But even without that, a struggle demonstration—like a Soviet election—carried a sense of political participation, and the individual Vietnamese usually felt he got something out of it.

The amount of this Party-led activity during the Vietnam War years was staggering. It is impossible to offer total figures because dates were not kept. If the statistics published by the National Liberation Front (NLF), the chief administrator of the effort, are to be believed, struggle meetings reached astronomical proportions. No doubt these figures were inflated, but even the act of inflation underscores the centrality of political *dau tranh* activity in the leadership's thinking. Whatever the actual statistical count, the extent and importance of the phenomenon hardly can be exaggerated. Steadily for years—daily in many of the 2,500 villages of South Vietnam—cadres organized and staged demonstration after demonstration. Ignored by the GVN, unreported by the American press, of enormous cumulative force, this was political *dau tranh* in its finest, purest form.

The struggle movement became the great social fantasy of the Vietnam War. Against a backdrop of high drama it offered the Vietnamese a hero role. The young could embark on a quest to look the dragon, or authority, in the face. The timid villager, all his life a persevering tortoise, found his moment of destiny. The struggle movement meant there still was magic in the mature world, one needed only to march and mumble the secret incantation—solidarity, union, concord—and the meek would inherit the earth.

It is extraordinarily difficult even in retrospect to render a

historical judgment on the actual impact the *dich van* program had among its targets, the ordinary Vietnamese people, both in the cities and in the rural areas. The central theme of the program was “we are not your enemy,” and any evaluation must judge the extent to which ordinary Vietnamese were convinced of this. Many urban Vietnamese, especially in Saigon, did seize upon it credulously and came to believe that the war had not actually polarized Vietnam, hence there was no need for them to make a choice—the well-known Vietnamese proclivity for *attentisme*, or fence-sitting. Some extended this to the belief that they could accommodate Hanoi if it did win.¹ The reeducation camps of Vietnam today are heavily populated with those who entertained that notion. Among the villagers, who saw the enemy up close and from a different perspective, there was greater recognition of the nature of the war and more skepticism about what the *dich van* cadres told them. Having said this much, it is still difficult to assign with precision the degree of credit that goes to the *dich van* program for the final outcome of the war. It may be that future historians will ascribe to it the bulk of the credit, holding that it sapped South Vietnam’s willpower, confounded the people’s perception of the issues at stake, and debilitated the society’s determination to resist—in short, it created the conditions on which a clear-eyed determined enemy could capitalize to achieve victory.

The *dich van* program operated among the enemy wherever possible, which meant not only adjacent to the battlefield but on the other side of the world.² *Dau tranh* strategy sought to do battle with America on its home ground, not with guns but with weapons of perceptual obfuscation, in other words, sand in the eyes. The High Command’s memory of the Viet Minh War was that shaping French perception had contributed mightily to victory, if not actually making it possible.

The *dich van* program among Americans operated on two levels: strategic, to shape perception by the Americans so as to convince them victory in Vietnam was impossible, and, therefore, undermine the war at home and American diplomacy worldwide; and tactical, that is, power nullification, to limit American response in Vietnam by inhibiting full use of American military capability there.

In understanding the *dich van* phenomenon, it is important to see it as a communicational effort to restructure the semantic environment. Perception is altered by linguistically channeling thought. The wartime statements made by the Vietnamese communists were not, generally speaking, a tissue of lies. Unlike fascist propaganda, with its calculated big-lie technique, there was truth in Vietnamese communists' statements, provided one accepted their definition of terms and their world view. The overall calculation of this "action among the enemy" campaign was to present America and the world with a single, unified image of North Vietnam as a tough, perhaps sometimes ruthless, but essentially attractive society, peopled by highly motivated, incorruptible nationalists dedicated to a cause of justice, peace, democracy, and possibly unification, a cause entirely domestic and defensive, threatening no one, certainly no one outside of Vietnam's borders. Inherent in this image was the assertion that the Vietnamese struggle was political; that use of massed military might was illegitimate (excluding necessary "defensive" measures taken by The People) and that all military force, by definition, was terror, repression, or war crime.

The doctrinal framework of this campaign involved the psychological dimension of war, which, reduced to its crudest element, consists of two basic assertions: (1) certainty of victory for the just side (or the righteous, the deserving, previously known as God's side); and (2) monopolization of virtue (and the corresponding vilification of the enemy). In every war in history each side has employed, fully or half-heartedly, with or without success, these two notions. Each has communicated these ideas to the enemy, and within its own camp. Until the rise of *dau tranh* strategy, however, this psychological effort was regarded only as an adjunct, and the clear understanding remained that the battle itself would be the decisive factor. The Vietnamese communists were the first really to break with the assumption that the principal and primary test must be military combat. They realized, dimly at first then with increasing clarity, that *it might be possible to achieve a change of war venue and determine its outcome away from the battlefield*.

The true genius of *dau tranh* strategy is not simply that it updates the ancient divide-and-conquer technique but that, judo style,

it turns the weight of the enemy's philosophical system against him. It works best, therefore, against a democracy and least well against totalitarians or fanatics. It agrees with its enemy that victory will go to the just because justice must triumph, but it does not print the enemy as unjust with a brush that smears all in the enemy camp. Rather the enemy is an abstraction—his unjust and misled leadership, a few selected individuals. Normal wartime polarization is denied. Over and over, it is asserted to the opposite camp, particularly to the vast civilian population at home, “*We are not your enemy*. The enemy is the unjust person who wishes to pursue an unjust war and surely *you* are not among those. We stand not for victory but for justice.” Thus the strategy does not seek to monopolize virtue but to share it. Although it declares *itself* to be virtue without flaw, it acknowledges that virtue also exists in the opposing camp; hence, it stigmatizes and vilifies only selectively. The Vietnam War, then, became a test of virtue. The outsider, looking in, was presented with the other side's own idealized picture of itself but was denied objective inspection. On the other hand, he knew very well the errors, shortcomings, and follies of his own side. Reality stands no chance against image. The farther the onlooker was from the scene, or the less his factual knowledge about the war and the society in which it was being fought (and such knowledge in the United States and the whole Western world, for that matter, was close to nonexistent), the more apparently odious became the comparison. That was the base on which Hanoi built its external *dich van* structure.³ Its use in shaping perception was to become a strategic weapon that would subvert American war support at home, ruin American diplomacy abroad, and limit and inhibit American response in Vietnam. It required establishing the fact that confrontation with the South should be only at the political level, that the GVN's use of military force was illegitimate. *Dich van* sought to force the enemy to fight according to its rules. The battle was to be organizational or quasi-political; the battleground, the minds and loyalties of the Vietnamese; the weapons, words and ideas.

Dich van techniques were used intensively to vilify American air power. During the 1965–68 air war period and again during the so-called Christmas bombing of 1972, a major *dich van* campaign was launched to force cessation of the air attacks. Hanoi

officials today generally believe, perhaps incorrectly, that the March 1968 halt in air strikes was the result of those efforts. Such activity, of course, was quite legitimate. If Hanoi could achieve a strategic goal with *dich van* techniques, who could say nay? Nor was the effort mere pretense or sham. Hanoi leaders worked diligently to build a favorable image. They altered policy in the name of *dich van*. They shot looters, purged cadres, refused alliances, ordered military offensives and lulls, all for the sake of perception.

Let me stress that I am advancing no simplistic devil theory that Hanoi alone manipulated world perception of itself and the war and therefore is to be credited with all the dissent, criticism, and opposition that subsequently developed in the United States. That would give the *dich van* program more than it is due.

Although a complete analysis is beyond the scope of this book, it is perhaps appropriate to list briefly the major factors that shaped American and foreign perception of Vietnam, the Vietnam War, and PAVN's strategy:

1. The hard events of the war itself, that is, the battles fought, the bombs dropped, the death and destruction.
2. The apparently interminable nature of the war; its complexity and the unique qualities that made it difficult to understand; the lack of logic in developments and the apparent inability of the situation ever to become decisive; the interpretation or lack of interpretation of many of the events by the mass media and academic community; the focus on a few strands while completely ignoring the whole canvas; the seductive quality of the trivial and transitory event for those who did the interpreting; and the richness and sheer impact of television; the lack of symmetry in reporting and scholarly study (that is, absence of balance because of North Vietnam's inaccessibility).
3. The dearth of knowledge about Vietnam in general because of journalistic and scholarly ignorance and lack of preparation (inability to speak Vietnamese, for instance) created, in turn, by a system that assigned journalists without necessary background and scholars without the proper education to do the interpreting; and the generally inaccurate comparison between Vietnamese in the North and the South resulting from this ignorance.

4. Normal vested political interests in the United States and elsewhere, which made the war a political football; the tendency in domestic political infighting to treat the war as the cause of all social ills (and whose ending therefore was a panacea); the great utility of the war for foreign leaders, not only those deeply hostile to America, but the many more who used it to serve their transitory or parochial interests.
5. The failure, shortcoming, and mismanagement of and by the American and South Vietnamese governments to explain their case.
6. The temper of the age; it was a time of domestic troubles, of racial, demographic, economic, and ecological upheaval; a moment in history that saw the rise of the irrational, the advent of the antihero, the decline in patriotism, and the emergence of a strange youth culture.

In short, the Vietnam War's advent coincided with a worldwide cultural revolution to which it was one of numerous contributors.

Certainly the *dich van* program's vilification of the American air war succeeded in the United States to the extent of causing many people to believe that the air strikes somehow were more brutal and horrible than they were, for instance, in mid-East warfare. It caused many to use the double standard proffered by the North Vietnamese: the demolition of a South Vietnamese bridge by the communists was acceptable while the demolition of a North Vietnamese bridge by the Americans was not. The critic of My Lai became an apologist for Dak Son or Hue. American capitulation, even embracing the enemy, somehow was more moral than commitments and long-standing promises to the South Vietnamese. Throughout the world *dich van* shaped perceptions that dissolve if subjected to even casual inspection, yet inspection seldom happened. It created myths that defy elementary logic, yet they endure and threaten to become the orthodoxy of history. It turned skeptical newsmen credulous, made careful scholars indifferent to fact, blinded honorable men to immorality. Outside of Vietnam, it can hardly be termed anything but an unqualified success.

With his vast internal organization and his external reach, there was one area about which the *dich van* cadre had little need to be concerned. It was in creating an image of his enemy, South

Vietnam, for the world. This image—of South Vietnam's people, its soldiers, its government officials, its leaders—was drawn from microscopic examination of flaws, deficiencies, and corruptions (not hard to find, particularly in a developing society under stress) by a veritable army of free-world journalists, each competing with the next, serviced to an unprecedented degree by the U.S. Mission and the reluctant but compliant GVN; and most important, all were free to write what they chose regardless of perspective, bias, ignorance, or consequences to the war effort.

The second *van* program was the deadly *binh van* (action among the military). In the Vietnam War it was essentially a proselyting effort aimed at enemy military and civil servants. Its goal was to destroy or weaken the GVN armed forces and governmental structure by nonmilitary means. Although *binh van* was not a military device, it was intimately bound up with armed *dau tranh*. Special *binh van* cadres, numbering perhaps 12,000, worked ceaselessly through the war to undermine the GVN military and governmental institutions by communicational means. The *binh van* team focused on the individual soldier or civil servant. It hoped, at best, to induce desertion or defection; at the least, to lower the morale of the soldier or civil servant so he would pursue his duties with less enthusiasm. *Binh van* techniques included the enunciation and practice of a lenient policy toward captured ARVN officers and officials; an intensive and intimidative war of nerves against elite ARVN units such as the Rangers or Paratroopers, or against key civilian officials such as village chiefs and district security officers; use of undercover agents to penetrate the military and civil service to spread dissension from within; use of blood ties and friendships to influence individuals in the enemy camp; tangible and intangible rewards for those who defected or deserted.

Evaluating this program is difficult. The ARVN desertion rate during the war was high—averaging from 2 to 4 percent per month—but it is impossible to establish a correlation between desertion and the *binh van* program. For one thing, the PLAF desertion rate was about as high as ARVN's. For another, few of the ARVN deserters went over to the other side; most returned to their home villages or attempted to lose themselves in the cities. Defection by civilian officials was negligible, the highest-rank-

ing defector of the war being a GVN district chief. It may be, however, that future historians of the Vietnam War will conclude that the *binh van* program not only was highly successful but that it should receive most of the credit for the communist victory, that the years of patient and insidious effort by those 12,000 *binh van* cadres so undermined the individual soldier's will to resist that ARVN, almost of its own weight, collapsed in the spring of 1975.

The third of the three *van* (action) programs that composed political *dau tranh* was called *dan van* (action among the people), meaning the people controlled by the National Liberation Front—People's Revolutionary Government (NLF-PRG). Basically this consisted of the administrative and motivational activity of the liberated, or safe-haven, area, that portion of the country under more or less day-to-day communist control. It also was conceived as the rudimentary beginning of a new Marxist society. The liberated area met the PLAF and PAVN forces' need for a safe base from which troops could operate and to which they could retire for restoration of physical and psychic energies. It stood as tangible evidence that the NLF-PRG was socially and governmentally based and not simply a collection of banditlike guerrillas. The objectives of the *dan van* program were threefold:

1. Organizational, throwing a net of organizations over the villager, enmeshing him in the system; also to oppose, frustrate, and nullify the various internal security measures taken by the GVN and the efforts of its agents to penetrate the liberated area.
2. Recruitment, enlisting the populace into civilian organizations and of course into the PLAF. Much of the recruiting was for corvée labor to build internal defense structures known as combat hamlets, which, it was hoped, with the aid of local guerrilla or PAVN units, could fend off or discourage ARVN military operations.
3. Financial, raising of funds through taxes, the so-called Viet Cong War Bonds; or direct collection that was extortion in everything but name.

Permeating this program was intense and ambitious communicational work, managed by special agit-prop cadres and employing most of the standard communist agitation and propaganda

devices: emulation campaigns, Stakhanovite movements, *kiem thao* sessions, anniversary observances, village mass meetings, and newspaper-reading cell meetings and education (which was indistinguishable from indoctrination in content although differing in organization).

Finally *dan van* consisted of necessary village administration, food production on both communal and private acreage, adjudication of disputes, medical care, internal communication, and monitoring and policing the whole system. This was so structured as to suggest legitimate government, the *dan van* program projecting the image of the liberated area as a peaceful, tranquil place with an advanced egalitarian social order where not only hostility but even animosity had vanished.

Assessment of Dau Tranh Strategy

Before turning to evaluation, it is useful to recapitulate the essential elements of this alien and complex idea. There are six of these, and, in perhaps slightly oversimplified form, they are:

1. This strategy combines Marxist-Leninist and Maoist doctrines on warfare that are chiefly characterized by this breadth of definition: they include elements and activities not normally associated with armed forces and war making.
2. Violent force is employed, but it is defined as "revolutionary" to distinguish it from other uses of force in warfare. There are two types of revolutionary force: military and political (diplomatic force may be regarded as a third force or as part of the political force). These two forms *always* operate simultaneously and in coordinated fashion.
3. Military force manifests itself as military actions (but can include institutional activities such as kidnappings and assassinations not normally associated with formal armed forces). Strategy employed is guerrilla and guerrilla-type using three kinds of troops—regulars, regionals, and locals—who employ three separate and entirely different kinds of tactics, which are terrain determined, that is, upland jungle, delta-rural lowland, and city.
4. Political force should be thought of as struggle, the people (particularly the villagers) struggling in "uprisings" and other forms of organized protest, dissidence, and riot. These ac-

tivities involve three specific mechanisms, or “actions”: motivational and other non military actions against the enemy soldiers; organizational and communicational actions among the general population controlled by the enemy; and proselyting actions among the enemy military and civil servants to induce desertion or defection, or at the least to reduce their effectiveness and commitment.

5. The struggle is deliberately to be drawn out in time since that is the best way to enervate and dishearten the enemy.
6. The objective is gradually to change the tide of the struggle and the balance of forces, increasing the tempo of the political struggle and the magnitude of the armed struggle, until it is possible to seek, fight, and win the final battle.⁴

In judging *dau tranh* strategy, certain caveats must be noted. We are too close to this phenomenon to see it fully and clearly, and conclusions must be tentative. The strategy is part of a worldwide geopolitical dynamic in which the entire concept of war is being reevaluated, thus no one knows the extent of its impact in history's judgment. Finally, certain constants remain—enlightened leadership, technological skill, disciplined organization, foolproof logistical systems, military unit pride, and individual spirit and courage and high morale—these are factors that have not changed. Having said this, however, it is still possible to make a preliminary assessment of *dau tranh* strategy and offer three judgments or conclusions.

The first conclusion is that the strategy put warfare into a new conceptual framework. Its essence was the idea of people as the chief *instrument* of warfare, not people as combatants or people providing support, but people as weapons, designed to be formed, forged, and hurled into battle. All people, without exception, are to be regarded as weapons of war. A youth under ten in some ways is a better weapon than an adult soldier. The purpose of political *dau tranh* is to mobilize the people. The purpose of the *van* programs is to create the hammer that will smash the enemy on the anvil of armed *dau tranh*. The secret of success, since the enemy obviously can emulate technique, is superior organization to permit fuller mobilization. What is launched, in fact, is a war of competing organizational weapons. The rule becomes

this: Victory will go to the side that becomes the best organized, stays the best organized, and most successfully disorganizes his opponent.

Structuring the struggle in this manner channels the enemy's response, in effect, dictates his strategy. He is forced to fight under unfavorable terms. The Americans and the Vietnamese in South Vietnam would have preferred to fight a war of professional technology, out and away from population centers, in outer space if possible. In the kind of war that was Vietnam, closing with the enemy meant battling him in his own arena, of and across the people. Here was a war different, not in degree of violence, in misery, or in death, but in kind. The devastation formerly directed at a target or confined to a battle zone now was visited on the people themselves, for they were the battlefield. Countering this strategy requires population and resource control, which means inevitably and deliberately inflicting civilian casualties. This is seen by outsiders as brutal acts against noncombatants, but those who come to understand the nature of the war know that no other strategic response is possible.

The second conclusion is that *dau tranh* strategy can confound the enemy's strategic response by creating what might be called a crisis of perception in the enemy camp. It can channel his perception of the war. The major operational rule here is that military force must never be seen naked, must always be politically clothed. Every action must appear to be political, perhaps only with military overtones. Or if this is not possible, as in a major military attack, it must be made to appear to be defensive violence with a political purpose, never simply military action for its own sake. This exploits the average civilian's view of war and politics. War he regards as wrong and evil even if sometimes necessary, but politics are human nature in action, always and everywhere acceptable. Thus if violence or a military action can be defined politically and is so perceived, it becomes more palatable. Neither PAVN's strategy nor its conduct of war was widely understood by either Vietnamese or Americans, mainly because it never seemed necessary. Failure to perceive in part can be put down to the effectiveness of *dau tranh* strategy and Hanoi's innate skill in obfuscating and distorting the nature of the war. But certainly as much blame must rest with those doing the perceiving,

in Saigon, but even more so in Washington, where leaders, especially in the early years, seemed to suffer from what Aldous Huxley called *vincible ignorance*, that which you do not know but believe you do not *need* to know. These leaders proceeded in their conduct of the war without ever making an effort to ground themselves in the strategy directed against them, hardly even examining their enemy. Particularly at the White House level they lived in a self-contained world, moving confidently in decision making and ignoring the opposite camp. Of Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War, one is reminded of Goethe's observation: Nothing is more frightening than ignorance in action.⁵

For the average American, attempting to follow the war was usually a case of sand in his eyes from the *dich van* program, to which so many well-meaning persons unwittingly contributed. The net effect was confusion—most people after a while simply did not know what to make of the war. This was the crisis in perception, engendered by linguistically channeling thought through simple systematic semantic manipulation.

The central element of this crisis of perception for the Americans had to do with the essential nature of the war. There were differing perceptions of the nature and purpose of the enemy, and from those flowed differing attitudes of what constituted proper conduct of the war as well as the desired or acceptable outcome. Some Americans viewed the Vietnam War as ordinary war, a test of physical military force. They held that regardless of how esoteric the enemy's tactics might be or how much he might attempt to confuse the scene by mixing in nonmilitary considerations, the fact remained that North Vietnam and a communist minority in the South were attempting to conquer South Vietnam by force. This military effort must be matched with counterforce, decimating in character and punitive in purpose. The enemy must be smashed militarily, North and South. The goal must be victory, for which there is no substitute. Victory meant enemy capitulation, if not openly and formally, at least, tacitly and, in any event, obvious and apparent to all.

Others, however, contended that Vietnam was not such an old-fashioned war. They agreed that North Vietnam and a minority in the South were trying to impose their will on the South Vietnamese, but a unique strategy was being used that blended

military, political, social, psychological, and communicational factors. That strategy dictated a nonmilitary response. A paradox existed. It was possible to lose the war by losing battles, but winning the battles did not mean victory. Therefore, while the traditional definition of "defeat" in war remained valid, the traditional definition of "victory" did not. Victory could only be defined as some new ongoing condition, not as a point in time. Vietnam therefore should be regarded not as a war requiring victory but as a problem requiring solution. The problem was political, social, psychological, communicational, *and* military. In the range of solutions that could be envisioned were some America could term successful and some not. In any event, what was required was that the Allied forces become, as the psychologists say, problem-oriented not victory-conscious.⁶

There were many other elements at work in the American society during the 1960s contributing to this crisis in perception. Certainly Hanoi, or even the Vietnam War itself, was not the sole cause. It was a time of shifting values, "cultural revolution" with all sorts of change for the nation and the individual alike. For a complex of reasons our national social consensus was fragmented. Possibly we would have experienced this fragmentation had there never been a Vietnam War, but one still must conclude that *dau tranh* strategy deliberately contributed to the condition and benefited from it.

The third conclusion is that *dau tranh* strategy succeeds to the extent—and only to the extent—that it is able to nullify or shunt aside the enemy's strength, both his military and his sociopolitical, or psychic, strength. In the Vietnam War it was able to limit South Vietnamese counterstrategy. Clearly it forced limitations on American conduct and caused hesitations in American pursuit of the war. The Allied forces in Vietnam had clear advantage in warfare's traditional criteria, mass and movement—they had more men, more firepower, greater logistic resources. But this proved of only limited advantage. It was difficult to bring the massive available power to bear against a force that was everywhere and nowhere, with no fixed command center, with no territory it was obliged to defend, or if such territory existed it was off limits. In fact, the vilification potential under *dich van* and *dan van* programs can make massive firepower more counter-

productive than useful. In the same way, Allied forces clearly had the advantage in movement, especially the mobility provided by the ubiquitous helicopter. But the ability to move quickly and with precision is an advantage only if there are clear targets of military concentration. This is not to overstate the case for the strategy's power-nullification capability. Advantage in mass and movement remains crucial in war. But it is to say that such superiority can be sharply minimized by an agrarian-based movement fighting a protracted conflict marked by gradual attrition and slow strangulation on both military and political fronts. To succeed, this strategy requires highly effective organizational effort—forever pursuing the ideal of the perfect organization to allow perfect mobilization and progress on to perfect motivation. It also requires meticulous attention to mundane matters of logistics and administration, managed with the genius of a General Giap. His example may not always be emulated. It is evident that the vulnerable Achilles heel of *dấu tranh* strategy is in the arena of supply, logistics, and materiel management.

In summary it seems clear that because of the strategy employed, the Vietnam War represented a new kind of war in history. It was not even a *war* in the ordinary old-fashioned meaning of that word. Rather it was a *struggle*, *dau tranh*, exactly as the communists said it was. This struggle was partly military and, hence, *war* as we have always known war. Also it was nonmilitary, an ultrahostile bloodletting nonmilitancy, to be sure, but still nonmilitary. The counter strategy against armed *dau tranh* proved successful and met the challenge through the long years of warfare. Even at the end the South Vietnamese military force was basically intact. But the political *dau tranh* gauntlet was never actually picked up; no comprehensive counterstrategy was ever developed, and the effort that was made failed.

There is in this assessment ominous meaning for the world. In the future any society can develop a hostile element. It may be small and unrepresentative, but if it is sufficiently determined to have its way, if it can convince the society of its implacableness, and if it is ruthlessly efficient in its own organization building, then regardless of how unreasonable are its demands or how outrageous its behavior, it can force its will on that society. It succeeds if it shapes the proper perception of itself: day after day

it dynamites buildings; year after year it kidnaps and assassinates individuals; it constantly ambushes police and soldiers; it creates a never-ending ever-worsening social trauma; it is a force that clearly intends to go on letting blood regardless of casualties, including its own, regardless of secondary destructive effects on the very fabric of the society, regardless of everything. That is the perception which must be shaped. Shaping it is no easy matter. If it can be done, however, the people of the society eventually will abandon allegiance to law and will come to feel that the issue of right and wrong has become irrelevant. They will conclude that the candle of justice is not worth the game of opposition, that the social pathology must stop and if the price is surrender, so be it. Then comes the stampede of public opinion to capitulation, against which the leadership is helpless. The advocate of *dau tranh* strategy is proven correct in his basic calculation: that no democratic society—no society perhaps—can fight a fifty-year war.

Notes—Chapter 10

1. This attitude was largely confined to the urban centers, the Vietnamese villagers having had earlier and different experiences with the communists. Even in the cities after the 1968 Tet Offensive and the Hue massacre, the number of uncommitted dropped sharply.
2. Although developed by the Vietnamese communists, the *van* programs owe much to the thought of Mao Tse-tung, who listed as the three essential activities in people's war those involving the people (communicational), the enemy (efforts to proselyte), and the guerrilla and his supporters (organizational and indoctrinational).
3. Probably it is no accident that Dich Van was the *nom de plume* chosen by the author of an article describing twenty five years of effort by the Ngoai Van Publishing House in Hanoi to "spread the Vietnamese Marxist-Leninist line to foreign countries." This "action among the enemy" consisted of books and newspapers in English, French, Spanish, also Russian and Chinese. *Tap Chi Cong San*, Dec. 1982.
4. These six elements in effect render *dau tranh* strategy into comprehensive English. For the same concepts in original communist-terminology English, actually a brilliant summary of the subject, the reader is referred to Le Duan's Fifth Party Congress statement quoted in Chapter 8. If the reader has stuck with the text through Chapter 10, every word in Le Duan's succinct statement will be enlightening.
5. The author has explored at some length the reason for America's vincible ignorance about North Vietnam and the strategy it used against the United States during the Vietnam War in a chapter of *The Second Indochina War*, to be published by the U.S. Army Center of Military History, originally presented as a paper at a military historians' conference, Airlie, Va., 7–9 Nov. 1984.
6. Among American officials concerned with the conduct of the war, doctrinal disputes seldom maintained this careful distinction. In the day-to-day swirl of operations for those in command, and even for onlooking critics, the argument tended to devolve to one of victory vs. negotiated settlement, with one side arguing it was necessary to "win the war" and the other insisting on accommodation. In the process rhetoric became simplistic and divorced from reality, eventually being reduced on the outer fringe to those advocating unilateral American withdrawal as the only proper course (capitulationists, as they were known in Saigon) and the superhawks, who wanted to use a "nuclear broom" to sweep out North Vietnam. Neither of these extremes ever exercised any significant influence among decision makers.

CHAPTER 11

Postwar Strategic Thinking

The overwhelming victory scored in the Vietnam War was ruinous for strategic thinking in Hanoi in a way a less-decisive ending never would have been. The perception that *dau tranh* strategy scored a stunning success created among members of the High Command and the Politburo such a sense of the superiority of their doctrine that they were unable to treat new strategic needs objectively. The war left them with the belief that they possessed a foolproof method for all problem solving—adapt *dau tranh* techniques. Ideological pressures, such as the belief in historical determinism, helped to convert their wartime experience into what they believed was a universally applicable formula for solving not only military but social, economic, and foreign policy problems. Mental blocks prevented other responses. The militant confrontational character of the *dau tranh* approach was put to work to solve the Pol Pot problem, to deal with the intractable Chinese, and to address gestures of rapprochement from the ASEAN states and the United States. The result in each case was grief and injury for Vietnam, but the leaders could act in no other way for they were prisoners of their own success.

The High Command's initial postwar stocktaking yielded a confident, almost smug, view that Hanoi's emerging geopolitical position was one of unchallenged superiority. The top military line commander at the time, Sen. Gen. Van Tien Dung, in a long and reflective article,¹ found that Vietnam was entering the future with "six overwhelming sources of strategic strength": its great ethnolinguistic unity and militant national spirit, its newly united collectivist socioeconomic system, a "technically advancing" armed force, a military and civilian leadership skilled in producing superior strategies, a "just national cause," and international sup-

port by the socialist world. His assessment and that of others made in this period (1976) indicated cognizance that PAVN faced a changed geopolitical condition with respect to China and South-east Asia but not a grasp of its full implications. Vietnam was entering an entirely new world of strategic thinking, but General Dung seemed to believe that with some minor adjustment the old strategy would serve any need.

In part this failure by General Dung and others was simply the result of inexperience. While generals elsewhere had come to regard strategic planning, military scenario exercises, and the like as routine, PAVN generals, so long preoccupied by internal war strategy, found such global thinking new, novel, and not something for which they were trained. Hardly one of them had ever examined systematically the world beyond Vietnam's borders or made any strategic estimates about it. The formal study of military science by PAVN leaders began late, chiefly because there had been no need for it earlier. PAVN's first Military Science Conference, for instance, was held in October 1970. Interest developed slowly and modestly through the early 1970s; after the war came a full plunge into study of military science in an enthusiastic if somewhat haphazard fashion. Now it is more or less treated as elsewhere: intellectual activity brought to bear on the subject of warfare.² PAVN military journals now devote much space to the science of war.³ Typical are articles on the following subjects:

1. The use of airborne troops for offensive operations as well as for defensive operations against enemy airborne forces (obviously with an eye on China). Studies conclude that speed is the key to success in defeating airborne attack.⁴
2. The shock effect of tank warfare, which orthodoxy now holds was the reason for victory in the final battle of the Vietnam War. This thinking on tank warfare owes much to Soviet influence.⁵
3. Extraordinary interest in air power. This is partially due to the experience of the so-called Christmas bombing of Hanoi in December 1972, which radically changed the High Command's view of strategic bombing. Most of the journal articles deal with the use of tactical air power. Treatment is orthodox, if somewhat elementary. It seems clear PAVN intends

to use air power in any future Sino-Vietnamese conflicts.⁶

4. Development of what is called "counteroffensive campaigns," also drawing heavily on Soviet military doctrine. A typical example is "counter-punch warfare" as it is termed, the PAVN response to the U.S. and GVN thrust into southern Laos in 1971 in Operation Lam Son 719.⁷
5. Computer application to military operations, acknowledged to be only in its infancy in PAVN.⁸

Attention continues to focus on traditional PAVN tactics as well. Military journals carry frequent articles on paramilitary warfare, and theoretical work appears on the "combat village," once thought relegated to history but which enjoyed a revival after the Chinese incursion. The concept of the combat village is as a contribution to "defense in depth," a paramilitary force-administered, highly mobilized, self-contained static defense element, employing everyone in the village to harass an invading enemy and impede its advance.⁹ The journals also contain extensive material on Chinese strategic thinking (see below), and reprints of articles by Soviet military leaders, including top officials.¹⁰

The overall concentration of effort in developing this body of military science knowledge has been to portray PAVN as a coordinated military instrument. Its vaunted strength through the years had been its guerrilla-oriented infantry. What now was required was for PAVN to become a credible military force in the new geopolitical context, to become an orthodox high-technology armed force. In the years after 1975 much staff work was devoted to planning joint military operations and preparing units for them through training and military exercises. Clearly the High Command considered PAVN deficient in its ability to mount complex, large, multiforce military operations. The focus on development goes beyond that, however, into planning for combined operations, that is, PAVN in combined operations with foreign armies.

Soviet influence is everywhere evident in this developmental work. The augmentation of air and naval capability is being underwritten by the USSR, as has been virtually the entire Vietnamese military budget since the end of the Vietnam War. Initial Soviet assistance, in the first year or so after victory, was what

might be called palace-guard military assistance, that is, the routine kind of military hardware and logistics needed to keep PAVN operational. As needs changed, so did the kind of military assistance supplied by Moscow. Kampuchea required guerrilla-bashing weaponry such as helicopter gunships. With the rise of the China threat, Moscow began delivering much more expensive limited-war materiel such as air defense systems, advanced aircraft, and fast naval vessels.¹¹ Soviet assistance to the PAVN Navy, viewed in strategic terms, appears to have two underlying purposes. The first is to prepare the Vietnamese naval forces to deal with amphibious attack by China, particularly in the coastal strip from Cam Pha to Thanh Hoa, that is, the Red River estuary region leading to Hanoi. The second is Soviet intention to transfer to the Vietnamese certain naval functions that primarily serve the USSR, such as naval surveillance and servicing of Soviet naval vessels. For instance, while Cam Ranh Bay is not a Soviet naval base, the new facilities and installations there have much greater utility to the Soviet navy than to the Vietnamese navy.¹²

The High Command's changed strategic thinking about weaponry extends cautiously to the most advanced hardware of all, the thermo nuclear. Hanoi military journals now make guarded references to the subject, and some theoretical work apparently is underway. The Hanoi press has noted, with no detail, the existence of the Nuclear Research Institute headed by Professor Pham Duy Hien. Nuclear physics is being studied both at the University of Hanoi and the University of Ho Chi Minh City by some fifty students under a faculty of a dozen either Chinese-trained Vietnamese or visiting French and Soviet physicists. Textbooks are said to be American. Vietnamese officials in the late 1970s contacted first Indian and then Soviet scientists to solicit assistance in nuclear research. The Indians were cordial but to date have provided no actual assistance. The USSR in 1982 sent a technical team to Dalat to restore the Dalat Nuclear Research Facility that had been built by U.S. technicians in the early 1960s for South Vietnamese use in producing radioisotopes for medical research and therapy. The core was removed in 1975, but the facility remained intact. When reactivated it can be used for medical purposes, agricultural research, and teaching. Because of its small size and design, it has little potential military

application.¹³ In any case Vietnam is at least a decade and a half away from nuclear weapons unless some nuclear power provides a crash-development program. It is even farther away from a delivery-guidance system for nuclear weapons.

Other indications exist of changed Hanoi views on nuclear matters. The SRV Foreign Ministry no longer makes periodic references to the idea of Southeast Asia as a nuclear-free zone, something it strongly endorsed before 1975. Apparently officials in and out of PAVN are now rethinking the whole matter of nuclear energy, nuclear proliferation, and Vietnam as a nuclear power. They do seem to view nuclear proliferation in the region (with a eye on Taiwan and South Korea) as an inherent danger and appear interested in heading it off by diplomatic means if possible. On 16 June 1982 the SRV officially notified the USSR—the depository nation—of its decision to subscribe to the Treaty of Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. The note stated that the SRV considers that “all nations are equals in the research on and the development and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, and in exercising their legitimate right to self-defense.” This latter clause apparently means that Vietnam reserves the right in the future to build atomic weapons if it deems such activity in its national interest.

Finally, in this list of new weapons systems to which PAVN is giving attention is a puzzling entry that has definite but unclear strategic meaning. Resources now are being heavily assigned to chemical warfare. This policy began in 1979 with the expansion of the Chemical Corps, previously a small element chiefly concerned with such matters as tear gas and smoke-signal devices. It was enlarged and assigned new missions involving both defensive and offensive chemical weapons. Then in 1982 the corps was upgraded to a Chemical Force and made even larger and more important. Chemical warfare units, once found only at division level, now extend down to the company. The Anti-Chemical Warfare Officers Training School was founded in April 1977; six years later (April 1983) some 6,000 officers had graduated. The school, according to the army newspaper, offers twelve courses, including ones on detoxification procedures and testing for radioactivity, with a total of thirty-five classes taught by a faculty of 100, making it one of PAVN's larger military schools.¹⁴

For years there have been persistent charges that PAVN has been using chemical agents in Laos and Kampuchea, the famed “yellow rain” reports. It now seems indisputable that someone has been engaged in chemical warfare in these two countries. Something more than bee defecation has been going on in the hills in Laos and Kampuchea backcountry in the 1980s. Quite probably it is third-generation chemical warfare agents—biodegradable mycotoxins—being tested by Soviet research-and-development scientists, with the assistance of the PAVN Chemical Force, certainly not without its knowledge. In any event it is indisputable that PAVN is allocating extraordinary resources to chemical warfare, for either defensive or offensive purposes, possibly for both.

Special chemical warfare teams travel continuously from unit to unit giving slide lectures, and refresher training is required yearly of all PAVN officers. Each military unit must keep a log book, recording any sickness thought due to chemical agents or “sickness resulting from chemical warfare missions,”¹⁵ which is not further explained. What are called K-8 teams circulate in Kampuchea on three-day field tests called “chemical prevention” exercises, and annual training exercises are run in June. Thai intelligence officers in 1983 said they had learned from defectors that PAVN artillery units in Kampuchea now are equipped with “Soviet-made DPA-99 and DCA-69 cannons used to fire chemical shells up to eight kilometers.”¹⁶

Evidently PAVN is preparing itself to be able to use chemical warfare against others or is expecting to have to defend itself against its use. PAVN’s capability is clear; its intent is not. Certainly if it were now subjected to such attack—as PAVN itself is accused of by Pol Pot and others—Hanoi would have raised a hue and cry. One speculative explanation for this great attention to chemical warfare is that Soviet specialists in Kampuchea and Laos are engaged in research-and-development work on new generations of agents—mostly mycotoxins—and are field testing them against local peoples. In such a case extensive protective measures would be required to prevent PAVN troops from being affected.

As suggested throughout this section, Soviet influence on PAVN strategic thinking has increased markedly in the past sev-

eral years. Exactly how much or to what extent the USSR directs thinking is impossible to determine. Changed attitudes and new military policies may simply reflect indigenous judgment and not be manufactured in Moscow. Soviet influence in the past was indirect for the most part, effected through the kinds of weapons supplied. This began in a serious way in February 1965, with the start of the American air attacks on North Vietnam. Moscow dispatched a high-level mission to Hanoi, which designed an air-defense system for North Vietnam and then installed it. This approach, high-level military missions offering weapons systems, appears to be the means by which Moscow still seeks to influence Vietnamese military thinking. Certain weapons imply certain strategies. Soviet military advisors now teach in PAVN military schools and academies. Soviet military writings have been translated into Vietnamese and presumably are read and studied.¹⁷ PAVN generals write that they are captivated by Soviet methods of making war and that PAVN must learn from the USSR and emulate the example set by its armed forces. Gen. Hoang Van Thai put it this way:

We are making every effort to learn Soviet military science and the experiences of the Soviet Army . . . [because] Soviet military science in general and its science of military command in particular are the most advanced in the world. For this reason it is necessary to study the Soviet military science methods and to fully apply them in a creative manner, consistent with Vietnam's needs.¹⁸

Determining how much this sort of expression is genuine and how much it is for the benefit of Moscow is problematical. Clearly problems are inherent in the present arrangement. The High Command cannot want to be dependent on a distant, possibly uncertain, source for its war materiel. Standing as mute witness is ARVN—a military system geared to what proved in the end to be an unreliable foreign arrangement. Even so, there does appear to be in the post-Vietnam War period a steady congruence of Vietnamese and Soviet military thinking. In part this is a reflection of the kinds of weapons the USSR is putting into PAVN's hands, and in part it is a similarity of leader mindset, the latter being the common view that the best strategic approach is one

marked by unity of purpose, determined adherence to the military plan once ordered, and doggedness in pursuit of military goals; the emphasis on mass and massive force posture; conservatism in military risk taking; and a paranoid sense of vulnerability. All of these characterize the military thinking in both systems.

Strategic Thinking

PAVN's strategists have been tried twice since the end of the Vietnam War—in an insurgent war in Kampuchea and in a brief limited war against China. Neither was what could be called a fair test, nor can many judgments be based on them about current strategic ability.

Hanoi's handling of the Pol Pot problem, as we have seen earlier, was less an exercise in strategic response than a compounding of error. One mistake was piled atop another, both political-diplomatic and military, but in all instances following the same pattern: an initial bad assessment leading to an erroneous policy that failed, followed by efforts to retrieve the failure, resulting in still further mistaken policies. While it was not so at the start, by 1983 Kampuchea probably had become a true strategic test for PAVN.¹⁹

The initial postwar geopolitical assessment of the Kampuchean scene—and the first mistake—was that all of the trouble was vested in the person of Pol Pot and that if he was removed the problem would be solved. First efforts involved diplomacy and what might be called political warfare (discussed in Chapter 1), which did not succeed. Then came a series of punitive strikes into Kampuchea by PAVN—a sort of “teach the natives a lesson” effort—which it was hoped would trigger a *coup d'état* in Phnom Penh that would depose Pol Pot. This also failed. Then in 1977, probably under the direct supervision of General Giap, there was a fallback to the old tried-and-true *dau tranh* strategy. Khmer refugee camps in Vietnam were scoured for likely recruits for a Khmer liberation army. Some 200 potential cadres were recruited, taken to the former Cambodian embassy building in Ho Chi Minh City, and organized into armed propaganda teams. Their leader was Heng Samrin, whom defectors have described as a former smuggler and horse thief. The teams received standard

armed-propaganda-team training and began running practice missions into Kampuchea from Tay Ninh province. A Khmer United Front was formed, and a Khmer Radio Liberation began broadcasting. Plans were announced for a "liberated area" inside Kampuchea and eventually for the formation of a Provisional Revolutionary Government, which would dispatch emissaries abroad in search of support. In short, a standard by-the-book approach. This effort was begun in early 1977 and continued until late 1978; by all evidence it developed and progressed well. As a strategy it was slow, as it always had been, but it seemed certain.

Then in late 1978—the moment can be pinpointed as the first week in December—this *dau tranh* strategy was suddenly abandoned, replaced by a limited-war strategy: invasion of Kampuchea using blitzkrieg tactics. The Pol Pot problem was to be solved Moscow style.

The reason for the strategic switch still is not known, but the best available evidence suggests two possibilities. First, the Politburo had grown increasingly impatient with the slowness of *dau tranh* strategy. It had come to believe that in this instance time was not on Hanoi's side because Pol Pot was transforming Kampuchea into a nation of people bound together by militant hatred of Vietnam. The longer this went on, the farther Hanoi would be from its ultimate goal of federation of Indochina. Second, a faction of younger PAVN leaders, senior colonels and major generals, had advanced an alternate strategy, a quick military fix. These "young Turks," convinced the Politburo that with their strategy the Pol Pot problem could be solved in six months or less. Undoubtedly General Giap and others argued their plan was unnecessarily risky, but the strategic thinking Giap represented had gone out of fashion by the mid-1970s. Soviet influence had been increasing in Vietnamese military circles, and many younger but upper-level PAVN officers had been vastly impressed by the American-style warfare they had experienced in the South during the Vietnam War, particularly the enormous firepower of infantry units and the mobility provided by the helicopter. Military journal articles in the 1975–77 period dealt for the most part with large-scale battles, use of massed artillery, vertical envelopment, and the like; and the writers drew many conclusions

about the Vietnam War, some of them wrong. Emphasis on Western-style warfare also came during this period in the form of field exercises, tactical maneuvers, and sandtable demonstrations. Inadvertently almost, guerrilla warfare fell into disfavor and General Giap and *dau tranh* strategy were shunted aside.

The strategy used against Kampuchea thus combined the strategic thinking of a former enemy and a present ally. Tank-led columns crashed across the Kampuchean border at Christmastime 1978, quickly fanned out across the country, and within days had occupied the major towns and reached the Thai border. The expectation was that a Panzer assault would traumatize and shatter Pol Pot's forces. Militarily he had not been regarded as a threat since he had no national army, having several years earlier broken his forces into independent district-village units with only light-infantry weapons. Pol Pot's response was to embrace Vietnam's *dau tranh*.²⁰ He abandoned Phnom Penh, took to the remote Cardamom mountains and the Thai border region (where there was sanctuary), and began an armed political response. PAVN's six-month deadline passed, and the war became protracted. The Pol Pot problem was not solved, simply made worse.

At this writing PAVN leaders are still casting about for a workable counterinsurgency strategy. Daily they bash guerrillas while working to create, from virtually nothing, an indigenous Khmer armed force, largely at the village-district level, to which PAVN can hand the burden of war and withdraw. Hanoi's experience to date is that army building is a painfully slow process, full of setbacks.²¹ In this "Khmerization" policy PAVN advisors are creating a single logistics supply system that will in effect integrate PAVN and the PRKAF and link it to Moscow. The advisors also seek to monopolize the PRKAF political commissar system.²²

PAVN's conduct of war in Kampuchea increasingly relies on a heavy-weapons approach; that is, extensive use is made of Soviet tanks, including those that can maneuver in mangrove swamps, of heat-seeking missiles,²³ of massed artillery and air strikes. Clearly the intention is to make use of technology to reduce casualties and the strain of war.

Annually PAVN forces strike against the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) installations along the

Kampuchean-Thai border, scattering the resistance fighters and driving the villager-refugees into Thailand. But these have little strategic meaning, however, nor does the PAVN High Command seem to think otherwise. This also applies to the annual "semi-withdrawal" of PAVN forces from Kampuchea, usually in the summer and generally about 10,000 troops. Both actions have meaning for Vietnam's foreign relations but not for strategic need in Kampuchea.

In strategic terms PAVN's tasks, at this writing unaccomplished, remain twofold: first, to "pacify" Kampuchea, that is, to destroy the resistance or at least drive it into the Cardamom mountains; and, second, to create a viable military entity out of the People's Republic of Kampuchea Armed Force. It seems probable, given time and continued Hanoi determination, that eventually these can be accomplished.

The PAVN's High Command strategic response to the China attack in 1979, even more than the Kampuchea campaign, was a case of backing into a strategy. The attack came suddenly and caught the generals unprepared—apparently they had never done much actual planning to meet an invasion by this huge, one-time ally. Their immediate response was to improvise, to throw up whatever resistance might delay the Chinese advance. The incursion lasted only seventeen days; hence it was over before a full-scale strategy could be devised and implemented. As it turned out this ad hoc response proved quite successful. The PAVN forces along the border and in the mountains that engaged the Chinese troops happened to have exactly the experience and knowledge required.

It is not greatly overstating the case to say the strategy used in Kampuchea—high-technology, Western-style warfare—failed while the strategy used against China—the older *dau tranh*-type strategy—proved to be successful, but cannot be depended on to be successful should a more determined Chinese army come again. PAVN generals writing about China pack their articles with name-calling, historical allusions, and such dense ideological jargon that it is difficult to determine exactly how they perceive the probable Chinese strategy that would be used against them. It is not even certain that these generals can think very clearly about China, a possibility suggested by their past performance.

The cold-war Chinese strategy being used against Vietnam is seen in Hanoi as singular, innovative, enterprising, and, PAVN strategists seem to suggest, effective. It is called a “multi-faceted war of sabotage” and does indeed seem to be unique and inventive. Since it is new to the Indochina scene, the official PAVN view of the Chinese strategic challenge²⁴ is worth quoting at some length.

In broadest terms Hanoi’s view is that China means eventually to rule the world. Two major obstacles stand in her way: the USSR and Vietnam. In preparation for world conquest the Chinese pursue four military objectives: China must become a nuclear power; China must build a “special forces belt” of insurgent, proxy, largely ethnic-minority support elements in an arc opposite its border, from Afghanistan to Vietnam; the PLA must be upgraded, the most important of China’s “four modernizations”; and China must be secured defensively so as to cope with possible invasion.²⁵ Such is the large strategic picture. To deal with Vietnam, in this Chinese thinking, requires a special kind of warfare. China is now at war with Vietnam—not a full-scale war, but more than a cold war—a “multifaceted war of sabotage”; it is described officially thus:

The Chinese expansionists and hegemonists are very bitter since they have been defeated in two wars of aggression against our country, in Kampuchea and on the northern border. Consequently they are making frantic efforts to carry out a scheme to weaken and eventually annex Vietnam and all of the Indochina peninsula. . . .

They pursue a multi-faceted war of sabotage in the vain hope of “winning without fighting,” of exhausting Vietnam’s resources, crippling its economy, creating political chaos and internal disorder so, without firing a shot, we are forced to become their vassals. At the same time the Chinese reactionaries prepare a large-scale war of aggression to be launched when they feel the opportunity is right.

Multi-faceted war of sabotage rests on a counter-revolutionary line, and is advanced in the name of “opposing hegemonism.” Actually it is big nation expansionism by reactionaries in the ruling Beijing circle.

In this multi-faceted war of sabotage, the enemy attacks us in many fields: economically, politically, ideologically and cul-

turally. They do everything possible to undermine our national defense system and our military potential. They use dangerous means and malicious tricks to foment rebellion and a *coup d'état* when the time is ripe.

Militarily they routinely send armed forces across our northern border along with espionage agents, commandoes, aircraft, and so forth. They seek to exert pressure, harass, provoke and engage, and thereby create a state of constant tension. They look for methods to distort our military draft system. They cause a longing for peace and encourage our troops to desert, and youth to evade the draft. . . .

The most deadly form of this multi-faceted war of sabotage is economic. In sabotaging us economically they use lackeys to sabotage machinery, set warehouses afire, sabotage production discipline and the managerial mechanism, so as to stagnate production. They encourage smuggling, speculation and hoarding, and cause a gold "hemorrhage" to undermine our monetary system. . . . China undermines our economic policies, sows skepticism to cause our people to lose faith in the Party's economic leadership. They distort our relationship with other countries and our practice of international economic cooperation. China frantically fixes embargoes, pressures private capitalist individuals and companies not to sign contracts with us, or to cancel, postpone or reduce them. The Chinese sabotage our warehouses, seaports, industrial installations. They organize gangs of smugglers to bring in contraband and take out gold and gems. They also introduce chemical poisons, insects, and micro-organisms to injure food production. . . .²⁶

They conduct an intense psychological war to distort Party and State policies. They secretly send reactionary, decadent cultural products into our country to sow the seeds of the decadent life style especially among youth. They provoke dissatisfaction and political opposition. They bribe or exert pressure on corrupt elements in the State apparatus and among the people to get them to serve as their lackeys. All these schemes are designed to erode the confidence of the people, confuse our friends and enemies, paralyze our revolutionary will, undermine the solidarity of PAVN and the Party, the special solidarity of Vietnam, Laos and Kampuchea, and the solidarity and cooperation between Vietnam and the USSR. . . .²⁷

The Chinese strategy against Vietnam, whatever else, clearly is a coherent, thought-out one. Its success is difficult to estimate

since it is new and still untested. The Chinese for years have been saying to Americans that they do not understand how to deal with Vietnam, but that they—with a thousand years of experience—do know how to influence Vietnamese behavior. That contention is what now is being tested along the remote reaches of the Sino-Vietnamese frontier.

The Vietnamese response to this Chinese effort to “win without fighting” is, of necessity, defensive and confined to internal Vietnam; therefore, it cannot be termed a full-scale counterstrategy. Its principles, however, are built around a concept of *dau tranh*, that is, mobilization of the population, extensive motivational campaigns, and centrality of Party leadership. Military journals stress the need for more centralized planning by the Party and the State, rather than leaving the response to the PAVN and provincial officials at the border. They call for increased internal security programs tailored to the region under attack. They also stress that there must be greater allocation of resources, particularly manpower, to PAVN; and they caution against the danger of allowing the Chinese threat to impinge on “the general defense mission,” referring to the possibility of attack from other quarters. Above all, great attention is being paid to the Montagnards along the border, since it is toward them that the Chinese are focusing their recruitment efforts. In sum then what we have seen develop between China and Vietnam since 1979 is a kind of semi-cold war with *dau tranh* strategy being used by both sides.

It would be quite another matter, of course, if and when China again invades.²⁸ This would be warfare on a much higher level. In the years following the Chinese incursion, Hanoi generals and military theoreticians devoted much energy and wrote at length about the strategy that should be employed, just as the Hanoi government allocated enormous resources, both manpower and material, to prepare the necessary defenses.

In strategic terms Hanoi's plans to meet a Chinese invasion rest on two pillars. The first is Soviet response—or, more germane, perhaps, Soviet deterrence to prevent such an attack; and if the attack does come, Soviet logistic support to make high-technology warfare against China possible. For Hanoi planners this is largely an imponderable. They seem to believe they would be supported, at least logistically, by the USSR; they also seem to believe they must, for planning purposes, assume not. Discus-

sions in PAVN theoretical journals tacitly acknowledge that a future Chinese attack probably could not be halted without the use of high technology, including air power, which would be available only if the USSR met its anticipated support responsibilities. At the same time, these articles indicate that PAVN must have a strategy to defeat the Chinese if for some reason the USSR fails to meet its obligations.²⁹

A new concept has been devised to meet this contingency—called the Military Fortress. While new and innovative, it does have roots in the “combat village” of the Vietnam War and the still earlier “fortified village” of the Viet Minh War. What is new is its ambitiousness and magnitude. The defended villages of the earlier wars used simple passive defense measures—for instance, tiger traps, punji-sticks in rice paddies, and a variety of booby traps—that made it more difficult but not impossible to enter.

The Military Fortress concept presently involves some two dozen districts that abut on China—an inaccessible region of mountain, jungle, and Montagnard—that are to be welded into one contiguous defensive structure. Each village of the district is to become a “combat village,” linked in tactically planning terms to neighboring villages; the entire district thus becomes a single strategic entity, and all the districts together become a grand Military Fortress. Villagers are all armed, and all have combat duties. In addition, well-trained specially equipped paramilitary forces are stationed in the villages (see Chapter 5). All resident villagers are required to obtain special security clearance, which weeds out ethnic Chinese and many Montagnards. Each villager spends part of his day training and working on fortifications, for which he gets extra rations. The work includes digging the usual combat trench, foxhole, bunker, underground food and weapons store-room, and the ever-present “vanish underground” installation, the hidden-tunnel complex. These are within the village. Some distance out, usually two or three kilometers, is what is called the “distant fortification,” a second ring of interlocked trenches, ambush bunkers, and heavy bamboo fencing, manned by well-equipped and well-trained paramilitary troops serving full time. Several villages (usually about five) are tied together by communication systems and fields of fire into “combat clusters” (about seven clusters per district), and the whole becomes a single strategic defense entity.

While there is much that is old in the PAVN High Command's concept of the district Military Fortress, there also are new elements. One is the "combat cluster" idea of interlocked combat villages (largely determined by topography and local defense needs) to increase firepower. Also new is the extension of the idea to the maritime districts along the Vietnam coast north of Haiphong; the newly created district Military Fortresses there are manned by nautically trained Coastal Militia-Self-Defense units (described in Chapter 5). Another change is terminology. The district Military Fortress no longer engages in *guerrilla war* but in *local war*, and the term *guerrilla* now appears to be passé. The "iron fortress" concept would seem to fly in the face of both Vietnam's past military experience and previous PAVN dogma, that is, the anti-Maginot Line mentality. Since the battle of Da Bang in Thanh Hoa province in the thirteenth century, when the Chinese captured an "impregnable" fortress, there has been strong Vietnamese prejudice against static, passive defenses. The combat cluster is anything but mobile and can contribute little to fluid warfare or protracted conflict. It may be that PAVN's thinking on the matter is still evolving.³⁰

There is, at least on paper, a counterpart military fortress in the cities, called the "combat ward." These combat wards have been "tested" in Hanoi, according to the press, and appear to be conceived as twenty-three self-contained defensive elements within the city.³¹

Eventually, this district-as-fortress concept will be extended throughout northern Vietnam, at least to the entire region between Hanoi and the China border. Discussion of the Military Fortress idea stresses that it is not simply a tactical device—"we do not merely dig tunnels," as it was put—but has a political *dau tranh* dimension: to mobilize and motivate the general population.³²

In the event of a Chinese invasion, of course, the regular PAVN divisions guarding the plains around Hanoi would be put to orthodox or limited-war strategic use. Thus Vietnam's strategy against China would be composed of the old and the new, the indigenous and the foreign, the self-reliant and the dependent.

Vietnamese strategic thinking in the opposite direction, toward the southeast, is embryonic at best. There was considerable fear among its neighbors, especially Thailand, in the days fol-

lowing the end of the Vietnam War that a victorious PAVN would become a rogue elephant in the region; instead it has become a dinosaur trapped in a tar pit. This situation may change, and Vietnam may again become a threat to the ASEAN states; if so, however, it is some time away.

Certainly PAVN has the military capability even now to crush Thailand's small, lightly equipped armed force in frontal battle. It could invade and occupy Thailand quickly, although most certainly that action would trigger the same kind of resistance encountered in Kampuchea. Further, such an invasion would incur the wrath of China, the extreme displeasure of the USSR, and in all probability quick military support from the ASEAN states and the United States. For the moment PAVN capability is there, but intent is not.

In the longer run PAVN will come to offer a credible threat to its Southeast Asia neighbors—again, Thailand is the exception—only if it develops adequate air and naval strength. A decision to acquire such capability will be made mainly in Moscow not Hanoi. The other threat Vietnam could offer would be the funding of insurgencies throughout the region.

Early in the 1980s the ASEAN nations moved steadily toward a common defense arrangement, became a *de facto* alliance but stopped short of forming an alliance. The combined ASEAN troop strength was about 800,000, and total military spending was about U.S. \$8 billion annually. Indonesia, fifth-largest country in the world, supplied the major component.³³

The five countries also have moved recently toward standardization of their weaponry. All use the M-16 rifle and the F-5 combat aircraft; most also use A-4 Skyhawks and Hunters fitted with Sidewinder missiles. Their navies all use the French-made Exocet missile. They have engaged in joint military planning and exercises, and Thailand and Malaysia have mounted joint anti-guerrilla patrols along their common border. Indonesia has loaned aviation fuel to Thailand, and there have been other examples of at least symbolic military cooperation.

PAVN strategic thinking about the United States seems even more cursory than about ASEAN. The United States is not seen as a credible military threat. Whatever challenge it can offer, the Hanoi leadership seems to believe, will be through China as a

proxy. Hanoi's journals have not had much to say about strategic thought concerning the United States, but that which appears is less vituperative than what is written about China and generally can be called realistic. For instance, a recent evaluation of what was termed "the Reagan Administration's six-point flexible-response strategy" noted:

The U.S. must play the role of top strategic power in accordance with its global strategy. The U.S. has global interests, global responsibilities and global military capability.

U.S. strategy requires that it muster its forces to a high degree and increase its military might rapidly and vigorously so as to regain the military superiority lost as a result of the Soviet Union beefing up its military strength in the 1970s.

The U.S. will simultaneously build a strong strategic nuclear force for "deterrent" purpose and develop sufficiently strong conventional and rapid deployment forces to "contain" its adversaries. Both deterrence and containment are important.

The U.S. must be willing and ready to take military action in all places and at all times if deemed necessary. Even where joint or collective action—when the U.S. tries to achieve it—cannot be agreed on with its allies, the U.S. must have the boldness to act unilaterally.

The U.S. will relegate détente to a level of lesser importance and emphasize a confrontational stand with respect to the Soviet Union, Cuba and Vietnam, in keeping with its strategic design to confront and repel the three revolutionary currents of the world in today's era.³⁴

In summary PAVN generals still are attempting to assess Vietnam's exact geopolitical position in the world and fix its future strategic requirements. Their experience in the decade following the end of the Vietnam War has tended to shake their previous confidence and has disabused them of some past notions and certain postwar ideas. Based on all that has been said and done to date, it appears that future strategy quite likely will be an extension of the strategies of the past. Writings on the subject stress the need for continuity in strategic thinking, and the tendency is to treat what is planned for the future as a logical extension of the past. The twin pillars of this "military art" on

which the High Command seeks to erect future military planning is, first, what is seen as Vietnam's innate skill in strategic defensiveness, and, second, the leadership's singular ability to root the "strategic process" successfully in the people. Defensive war is regarded as a precise and finite activity on the battlefield, involving a skill the Vietnamese mastered long ago and have now honed to perfection. It seems to the Vietnamese to be their fate always to fend off the invader, "usually a bigger country coming from far away, who is numerically superior . . . [against whom] we employ scorched-earth tactics, evade his forces initially while keeping our troops in low profile in remote areas and deploying them in ambush attacks and using the main force to attack the enemy in the rear until he becomes battle-weary . . . always using the principle of a small force to win a protracted conflict."³⁵

Rooting the struggle in the people, the *dau tranh* theme, is equally as precise a concept, whether a liberation-war strategy or a defensive-war strategy:

The military art of the Vietnamese people's war involves fighting and winning victory through the combined strength of all the people fighting the enemy. This is also the military tradition of our nation. . . . The reality of the wars of resistance against France and the U.S. is that . . . our army and people fought the enemy by means of *armed* and *political dau tranh*, by conventional and guerrilla war, and with main force troops, local army troops and guerrilla militia troops.³⁶

Thus we can discern four major trends in strategic thinking at the High Command level. The first is that great premium is placed on military technology. This has resulted from the example of American military war making in the Vietnam War, from PAVN experiences in Kampuchea, and from the continuing advice of Soviet military advisors. Regardless of the kind of warfare to be pursued, whether counterinsurgency in Kampuchea or against a new Chinese invasion, military technology increasingly is regarded as something of a panacea.

The second is a trend back toward the orthodoxy of *dau tranh* strategy, which is not seen as being antitechnological. This trend is partly because of the success of PAVN paramilitary forces against the invading Chinese and partly because of the acknowledged successes scored by Pol Pot guerrillas in Kampuchea.

The third is recognition that PAVN must be prepared to fight both limited small-scale orthodox wars and protracted guerrilla-type wars. The present counterinsurgency effort in Kampuchea is now regarded by the High Command as a form of high-technology war—since it can neither be defensive nor, it appears, rooted in the people. A future war against China will require a strategy that mixes orthodox limited-war strategy and elements of *dau tranh* strategy. As a practical matter, there is renewed attention to preparing for warfare in mountainous terrain. Since Vietnam is 40 percent mountainous (and 75 percent forested) and the Vietnamese have battled on this terrain in the past, there is nothing new being imposed here. However, the High Command now appears to believe that high-technology warfare in the mountains is possible, which was not its belief earlier.³⁷

The fourth is the realization that present strategy in Kampuchea and the strategy designed for use against China depend on the USSR's standing fast with Vietnam. This present strategic view is likely to remain unchanged, at least until the Kampuchean problem is resolved, one way or another, and until the China threat diminishes.

Notes—Chapter 11

1. Gen. Van Tien Dung, "Build a Powerful PAVN to Defend the Socialist Vietnam Fatherland," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, May 1977; an address given earlier to the PAVN Higher Military Academy, circa late 1976. It refines the ideas expressed still earlier by Gen. Dung in a *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan* interview on "Building PAVN in the New Stage," broadcast by Radio Hanoi, 26 Feb. 1976.
2. Hanoi military theoreticians give surprisingly short shrift to orthodox Marxist military doctrine (as opposed to their own variant) in these postwar writings, probably to avoid dealing with obligations to Chinese Marxist thought. Such attention as is given in military journal articles is confined to listing certain basic tenets: that Marxist military thought provides a rationale for warfare, that is, the justified use of war to seize political power; that it permits distinguishing between wars, just and unjust; that it offers practical advice in methods of mobilization, in "arming the revolutionary masses"; and that its "political" orientation permits taking advantage of opportunities presented by revolutions, uprisings, and "self-defense" wars. For a short but authoritative statement on the place of Marxist military thought in current Vietnamese strategic planning, see Lt. Gen. Pham Hong Son, "The Military Theory of Marx and the Present Task of Defending the Fatherland," *Tap Chi Cong San*, no. 6, June 1983.
3. For a discussion of the place of modern military science in PAVN, see Gen. Hoang Van Thai, "Experiences in Military Science," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, no. 12, Dec. 1980. Many of the articles written on military science appear to be primarily concerned with convincing PAVN officers of its importance.
4. Maj. Gen. Dao Dinh Luyen, "Use of Airborne Troops," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Nov. 1982.
5. Sen. Col. Le Xuan Kien, *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Aug. 1982.
6. Brig. Gen. Hoang Van Khanh, "Aerial Attacks and Countering Aerial Attacks," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Jan. 1982; and Col. Le Vinh, "The Battlefield Air Force," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Feb. 1981.
7. A counteroffensive campaign is defined as "a special type of offensive operation in which troops that were on the defensive shift to a counteroffensive in the course of or after retaliating against attacking enemy forces. The objective is to seize the strategic initiative." Col. Nguyen Phu Chut, "Counter-Offensive Campaigns," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Oct. 1982.
8. Capt. Le Tu Thanh, "Several Matters Concerning Automated Command Operations," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Oct. 1982.

9. Maj. Gen. Ho Ba Phuc, Military Region 9 commanding officer, "The Combat Village in the New Situation," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Nov. 1982. See also *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 26 Nov. 1982 for two articles on the subject: PAVN engineer Lt. Col. Nguyen Quang Han deals with fortification measures; Sen. Col. Nguyen Thuan indicates that much of the border region opposite China is now being heavily fortified through the use of "combat village" labor.

10. Soviet Defense Minister Marshal D. F. Ustinov, "Strengthening the National Defense Capability of the Soviet Union," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Nov. 1982. The rather pointed thrust of his article, for Vietnamese readers is that, in the USSR's experience, military cooperation with others is fine, but each country must defend itself and not depend on alliances.

11. A *Bangkok Post* editorial, 7 July 1983, stated that long-range Soviet SS-20 missiles were now in place in Vietnam, presumably targeted on China.

12. This pattern extends to the entire Soviet assistance program for the Vietnamese navy, that is, Soviet aid is conditioned more by Moscow's concerns about China than by the needs of Vietnam's navy.

13. Radio Moscow, 7 Apr. 1983, broadcast a report by its correspondent, Sergey Alekseyev, from Dalat saying that "a nuclear research center is being built in Dalat with the aid of the Soviet Union." AFP reported 28 June 1983 from Hanoi that the Dalat reactor had been "restored to operational capacity." Other reports indicated it would not become operational again until 1984. The director of the Dalat Nuclear Center is listed as Pham Xu Khien.

14. Chau Ngoc Man, "Teaching and Learning at the Antichemical Warfare Officers' Training School," *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 19 Apr. 1983.

15. Vietnam News Agency, 17 Aug. 1982. VNA also discussed chemical warfare defense training in Kampuchea in articles published 8 Feb. and 9 Mar. 1983. Other articles on PAVN chemical warfare were carried by VNA 17 Aug. 1982, 13 Oct. 1982, and on the Chemical Force's twenty-fifth anniversary, 19 Apr. 1983.

16. *Bangkok Post*, 24 Dec. 1982, quoting Thai navy spokesman, Capt. Prasarn Chuchina.

17. Soviet Defense Minister Ustinov, "Strengthening the National Defense Capability of the Soviet Union."

18. Gen. Hoang Van Thai, *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Sept. 1982.

19. For a recent authoritative view of official PAVN strategic thinking as influenced by the Kampuchean experience, see Maj. Nguyen Nang, "Thoughts on the Campaign Art of the Vietnamese People's War," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Feb. 1983. Col. Nguyen Xuan Hoa, who ap-

parently is deputy commanding officer of PAVN B-09 Corps and served in Kampuchea for four years, wrote a carefully stated and guardedly critical "lessons learned" report that appeared in *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan* in June 1983, titled "The Lesson of Success of an Army Corps in Performing International Duty in Kampuchea." The same journal, Oct. 1982, carried an article on PAVN experiences in building an indigenous local Khmer military force in Svay Rieng province, Kampuchea. See also Vietnam News Agency 21 Apr. 1982. The sense of most of these writings is that PAVN did not realize what it was getting into when it invaded Kampuchea and that the proper strategic approach now is to "exercise restraint" while Hanoi diplomats discourage support for the resistance, more or less on the model of the USSR strategy in Afghanistan.

20. For a brief firsthand outline of Pol Pot's strategy against PAVN, see "Guerrilla Warfare Against the Vietnamese Aggressors," broadcast by Radio DK, 20 May 1983.

21. The Phnom Penh army is officially titled the People's Kampuchean Revolutionary Armed Force (PRKAF), which claims to have been founded on 19 June 1951; it is now under the command of PRK Defense Minister Gen. Bout Thang. As of mid-1983 it reportedly stood at about 25,000 men, although its desertion rate was running so high (50 percent a year at that time) that such a figure was meaningless.

22. To this end a PAVN-PRKAF military pact, called an "agreement of cooperation," dealing with PAVN training of PRKAF political officers and establishing a single logistics system was signed on 23 Dec. 1982 by PAVN Commander in Chief Sen. Gen. Van Tien Dung and PRK Defense Minister Bou Thang.

23. *The Nation Review*, Bangkok, 21, 24, and 28 Feb. 1983.

24. For typical and informative discussions of China's current semi-cold war against Vietnam, see Maj. Gen. Sung Lam, "The Army and the People of Quang Ninh Combine Their Strengths to Defeat the War of Sabotage," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Dec. 1983 (JPRS SEA 84-069); and Lt. Gen. Vu Lap, "Soldiers and Ethnic Minorities in MR 2 Determined to Defeat the War of Destruction," same magazine, Apr. 1984 (JPRS SEA 84-124).

25. Drawn chiefly from Nhuan Vu, "Concerning Chinese Military Strategy," *Tap Chi Cong San*, Aug. 1982. In the same issue see also Thien Nhan, "The Enemy's War of Economic Sabotage." For additional discussion of the PAVN High Command's view of Chinese strategic thinking, see Maj. Gen. Dang Kinh, "Building District Military Fortresses Along the Northern Border"; Central Committee Agit-Prop expert Nam Huy's article, "Fighting the War of Sabotage on the Ideological Front in the Northern Border Provinces," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Jan. 1983;

and the editorial, in the same publication, titled "Determined to Win the War of Sabotage."

26. Thien Nhan, "The Enemy's War of Economic Sabotage."

27. Nong Quoc Chan, "Oppose Enemy Psychological Warfare at the Sino-Vietnamese Border," *Tap Chi Cong San*, June 1982. What is involved here apparently is Chinese efforts to develop support among ethnic minority highlanders in the border region.

28. After the incursion, China continued to maintain nine armies in the Vietnam border region: three in the Kunming Military Region south of Megzi and six in Guangzhou Military Region, including one on the coast. Beijing also strengthened its military installations on Hainan Island across from Vietnam, increased the size of its amphibious landing fleet, and beefed up its bases at Zhanjiang, Shantou, Haikou, Yulin, and Beihai.

29. A fairly full description of the kind of air defense PAVN would attempt to offer against a Chinese air attack is found in Maj. Gen. Hoang Van Khanh, "Air Defense Campaigns and Strategies," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, June 1984, in which the PAVN Air Force chief discusses the "primary problems" he would face. In "Tank Shock Power in Offensive Campaigns," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Aug. 1982, Sen. Col. Le Xuan Kien argues that tanks must be an integral part of any future defense against China.

30. For representative writings on the subject, see "District Fortress Building," *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 10 Apr. 1983; Col. Nguyen Quang Han, "Building Combat Villages," *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 26 Nov. 1983; and "Local People's War Campaigns," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Apr. 1983.

31. *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 2 Mar. 1984.

32. Sen. Col. Chau Khai Dich, "The District Military Fortress," *Tap Chi Cong San*, no. 7, July 1984.

33. For an excellent detailed military analysis of the threat potential that PAVN offers to ASEAN, see *Asian Defense Journal* (Kuala Lumpur), May 1982, the section edited by G. Jacobs, which includes a great deal of data in chart form setting forth comparative air and naval strengths.

34. Thanh Tin, "The Reagan Administration's Six-Point Flexible-Response Strategy," *Tap Chi Cong San*, June 1982.

35. *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 21 Nov. 1978.

36. Maj. Nguyen Nang, "Thoughts on the Campaign Art of the Vietnamese People's War," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Feb. 1983.

37. Lt. Gen. Pham Hong Son, "Several Matters Concerning Warfare in Mountainous Forested Terrain," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Feb. 1983.

SECTION V

PAVN, Society and the Future



CHAPTER 12

PAVN and Society

Vietnam's armies, both past and modern, were never what could be called professionally militaristic, as that term would be applied in the West. The martial tradition, noted earlier as a Vietnamese heritage, always manifested itself in mindset or attitude rather than in trappings, panoply or emphasis on a military way of life. In terms of martial tradition, PAVN's heritage appears to be about average for Asia—more steeped in the tradition than the Chinese or Koreans, less so than the Mongols or Afghans. Out of its heritage and the conscious Party effort to shape self-perception has come PAVN's view of itself today. Together these factors have yielded a model of the PAVN fighting man, possessing certain virtues, which in turn has provided a military ethos.

The raw material with which the system works, the ordinary Vietnamese foot soldier, is more or less the same as is found elsewhere in Asia, certainly in other Sinic societies. Profile studies done over about a ten-year period provide a wealth of detailed information about the average Vietnamese soldier. Most of these studies ended in the early 1970s but the basic data supplied probably has not changed much in the subsequent decade.

The prototypical, or composite, PAVN soldier in 1970 was 23 years old, born and raised in a village, a member of *ban co* (poor for many generations) class, unmarried, with less than five years' formal education. His rural, agrarian background was probably the dominant influence on his thinking. He was one of five children who lived his pre-army life in an extended family arrangement that included several generations and collateral relatives. He tended to resent "outsiders" in principle as well as urbanites or "city people," but in neither case was this along strict

class lines. His limited schooling did not seem to him to impose any particular difficulty in coping with army life, except in certain technical work. He was raised as a nominal Buddhist, but had always been subject to many direct and indirect Confucianist and Taoist influences. He was singularly uninformed about the outside world, even other parts of Vietnam. He firmly believed in the importance and collective strength of the family—more correctly the *ho* or extended family—and seldom questioned its demands on him, an attitude that served him well in his military career. This loyalty to some extent extended to the broader social scene. It hardly occurred to him that he should, or even might, question the philosophical basis of the society in which he lived.

At the age of nine he joined the Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneers and spent much time in its activities. At sixteen, if he impressed his elders as being worthy, or if his family had influence, he became one out of four youths (on an average) to join the Ho Chi Minh Young Communist League which led more or less automatically to membership in the Party as an adult. At twenty or twenty-one he was drafted, receiving two months' basic training and assignment to a unit. He did not particularly want to enter the army nor did his parents wish it. He did not like military life and had little desire to make it a career. Rather he had a strong desire to return to his home village, marry and spend the rest of his life farming. However, he was obedient and accepted discipline easily. He had faith that PAVN and the State would treat him in a generally fair manner which for the most part meant assistance if he was disabled, and compensation for his family if he was killed in battle. He was non-materialistic, could get along easily with the bare necessities of life and, in fact, neither missed nor particularly desired many luxuries. He regarded simplicity as a great virtue in the manner of Aristotle and the Greek stoics. This was fortunate because he got little material reward from the system: his pay was absurdly low, averaging per month the price of a dozen bottles of beer, which was what he spent his money on, if he could locate the beer.

Despite extensive indoctrinational efforts by the Party, he was not what could be called highly politically conscious. Much of what he knew about politics consisted of a series of slogans he had been obliged to memorize, the meanings of which he only dimly

comprehended. He did not trust “political speaking” people and tended to judge individuals on the basis of personality, referring largely to Confucian virtues. Pressure to conform in political thought came from the top down, not from his peers. The only prominent figure he admired unstintingly was Ho Chi Minh, and, even then, more as a father figure than as a political leader. Beyond his brief basic training he received little additional military training. He was taught to read if he was illiterate. He was survival-wise and could scrounge and make do under adverse conditions. Although ingenious and generally competent, he was not proficient in a technological way and often was deemed “anti-mechanical” by his officers, meaning he possessed low mechanical aptitude. Either naturally or because of indoctrination, he was a tough, disciplined combat fighter who persevered with stubborn determination, often against hopeless odds.

This combination of characteristics meant he was no automaton and could make him stubbornly hostile, even rebellious on occasion, without regard to consequences. He knew little about strategy or tactics, believed warfare largely consisted of careful planning, meticulous preparation, and then sustained intensive mass attack.

It is on this reality that the idealized PAVN soldier has been sculpted. The Vietnamese Revolutionary Cadre (officer) and the Vietnamese Fighter-Combatant (enlisted man)—as they are officially termed—are proclaimed to be unique among fighting men of the world. Indeed, the “Party soldier” does seem to differ somewhat in behavior and personality from the Vietnamese who served in ARVN or from soldiers in other armies of Asia. Probably the differences are traceable to class-structure practices by PAVN, to intense and prolonged training and indoctrination programs, and to the Party’s deliberate effort to create the “new Vietnam soldier.” Instructions to PAVN even in the earliest days often had a unique quality. Ho Chi Minh, for instance, produced a famous critique of the Le Hong Phong campaign (1950) in which he set forth ideal military behavior as he saw it:

Soldiers should heighten their discipline; strictly obey orders from higher headquarters [note, not superior officers]; love the soldiers (advice to officers); respect the people; take good care of war booty and public property (i.e., don’t loot); sincerely make

criticism (*kiem thao*); fully mobilize the propaganda effort; eschew subjectivism (i.e., don't think in personal terms); win time; keep absolute secrecy.¹

The PAVN soldier has allegiances that extend beyond the armed forces. First loyalty is to the Party. Within the unit, at least prior to the introduction of the one-man command system, his allegiance was divided between his military commander and his Political Commissar. As discussed below, the PAVN soldier has production responsibilities, that is, he is expected to be "productive" in nonmilitary activities.

All of these practices and programs have served to produce, in theory and to some degree in reality, an army with a singular set of attitudes. The chief architect of the PAVN indoctrination system, Gen. Nguyen Chi Thanh, described it thus:

Mercenary soldiers never fight with idealism. Their usually low morale reflects the bankruptcy of capitalism. Our army is a revolutionary army. Our soldiers know for whom and for what purpose they fight. Views and theories are set forth for them to study and learn so they develop fighting idealism. Their idealism becomes an invincible force. . . .²

The reason PAVN soldiers fight, General Thanh added, is because of indoctrination:

The fighting spirit of our soldiers can be built only on class hatred. . . . If separated from this idea our soldiers will not know for whom, against whom, why or for what they fight. They will dream. They will have no idealism. They will not understand the reason for the condition of their lives.³

Such is the ethos that the Party and society attempt to inculcate in the PAVN soldier and officer. It is the influence that flows in one direction, and there is also influence in the opposite direction, from PAVN to society.

Civil-Military Relations

PAVN's role in Vietnamese society is more complex and contradictory than is the case with most other armies of the world. It is a relationship that is totally integrated: there could never rise in Vietnam a "military-industrial complex" that would stand distinct from the rest of the system. And it is a relationship that

is highly symbiotic, a dependency that is both material and psychic.

There are, of course, benefits for both in such an arrangement, and also highly undesirable problems or intractable social contradictions, as they are called. From society's standpoint, PAVN, even though not intentionally, distorts the social process, warps society itself. Its sheer size has become a smothering presence. On the other hand, casting onto it multifaceted duties beyond the ordinary engenders in PAVN a permanent condition of cross-purpose and even an identity crisis, so, like a confused actor, it is never certain which role it is playing. PAVN must be all things to all people and special things to the Party; it must both follow the people and lead them; it must serve both the political line and the military line, even when they cross. PAVN must act as vanguard of the Party in military affairs but be scrupulously subservient to it. Such a complex world would try the wisdom of Solomon. A sense of this pulling and hauling is conveyed in the following selection of official instructions:

Each soldier must understand the relationship between politics and war, between victory in combat and having the support of the people and the material support they provide. Each soldier must serve the people and win their support according to the needs of the Party. To do this each soldier must understand the Party's policies and must know how to motivate the people. Each military unit must have an active and effective political movement.⁴

Guided by the principles of democratic centralism within the armed forces, and under the slogan "Loyalty to the Party and Faithfulness to the People," the troop indoctrination program has as its objective to instill ardent patriotism, love of Socialism, a spirit of proletarian internationalism and revolutionary heroism, subordination of self to state, a keen sense of discipline, internal [unit] solidarity and closeness with the people.⁵

Beginning with the realization that war is a continuation of politics and that *armed dau tranh* stems from political doctrine and must be obedient to that doctrine, from an appreciation of the role and mission of the armed forces in the class struggle, the Party sets forth the fundamental principle governing the armed forces: that the Party must assert and continuously

maintain its leadership over the armed forces. Party leadership over the armed forces is an objective inevitability.⁶

The Party's military thought has its origins in Marxist-Leninist military theory which stresses that the military line must derive from and be subservient to the political line. . . .⁷

Under the direct, absolute and all-encompassing leadership of the Party our army constantly maintains and develops its revolutionary qualities rooted in the working class and completely loyal to the Party's revolutionary cause. Cadres and fighters [that is, officers and enlisted men] are loyal to the Party and faithful to the people.⁸

Vietnam today is officially an egalitarian, proletarian-based, classless society—a description meant to apply equally to its armed forces. The intent, dedication to the egalitarian principle, is as commendable here as in any other society where it is at work. Cynical Vietnamese refugees, however, have observed that in Vietnam today there is no egalitarianism, simply equity in nothingness, paucity spread evenly. In a sense that is true; conditions are bad, but uniformly so—there is little to be had within the system, but ruling elite and masses share it equally.

In pursuit of the goal of a proletarian-based classless system, society as a whole has the responsibility for ensuring that its armed force meets the criteria set forth in the new social order. Conversely, PAVN is charged with assuming, in alliance with the Party, the vanguard-leadership role among the proletariat and in society in general. This is necessary, it is held, else the proletariat will never rise above trade-union mentality, to quote Lenin. The essence of the doctrine, of course, is the notion of class struggle. PAVN is to help the Party impregnate proletarians with the idea of class struggle:

This historic mission . . . involves a difficult, fierce and protracted conflict between the ruling working class and the bourgeoisie and other exploiting classes which have been knocked down but are still attempting to stand up with the help of international reaction.

One of the subjective causes of the present abnormal socioeconomic situation . . . is that Party military cadres only vaguely understand the intensity to the class struggles. . . .⁹

PAVN is not regarded as an army of the people although it serves all of the people, only as an army of proletariat. Since classes, not nations, make history, to quote Marx, PAVN of necessity must be proletarian based and classless. This has been no easy accomplishment since it goes against the nature of an armed force as well as against traditional Vietnamese instincts.

Our army is an instrument of the class struggle to carry out the two strategic tasks of building socialism and unifying the country. . . . We are now [1963] building a standardized modern revolutionary army. . . . The class struggle in the country is not finished but continues. This is reflected in the armed forces, where soldiers must be made ideologically and morally stronger. Class struggle causes some soldiers to lose their class viewpoint, to become unstable. The influence of feudal, bourgeois, petty-bourgeois thoughts remains among the people, even in the army where proletarian thinking dominates. . . . Proletarian thoughts are like a lily whose perfume stimulates and makes people feel pleasant while nonproletarian thoughts are a flow of dog excrement whose foul smell causes weak persons to be sick. . . .¹⁰

Thus, PAVN, because of its nature, has always been considered different from other armies, at least noncommunist armies:

Ours is a people's armed force under the leadership of the Party, and is entirely different from imperialist armed forces which engage in invasion, oppression and plundering . . . Our Army differs entirely from the imperialist army because of its revolutionary nature and its class nature. Our Army is a new type of revolutionary army, founded and led by the Party and the working class. It is the tool of the Party to accelerate the revolutionary and class struggle. The nature of our Army is that of the working class.¹¹

The proletarian nature of PAVN is its most singular feature. The principles inherent in that nature dominate personnel practices from the initial selection process, through career assignments and promotion policies, to purge or postretirement duty. Throughout their careers PAVN soldiers are constantly indoctrinated with the duty to be *quan quit voi dan* (in intimate association with the people). The process of *qui dinh thanh phan* (classifying social classes) permeates the entire system and largely fixes the individual's position within the armed forces. This adherence

to class origin is most clearly demonstrated in officer recruitment. Among the sons (or, in some cases now, the grandsons) of the two basic classes in pre-Marxian North Vietnam, the exploiter and the exploited, only the latter can join PAVN. And of the five subclasses within the exploited class, only the *ban co*¹² can ever become officers. Others from the exploited class can rise only to become noncommissioned officers, or remain enlisted men. Sons from exploiter-class families (that is, middle and upper class) normally cannot serve in PAVN at all. Near the end of the Vietnam War some from the exploiter class were drafted, but seldom were they trusted with weapons. This is class consciousness carried to its ultimate point. Such a policy has denied PAVN manpower, but it also has strengthened PAVN greatly by harnessing a powerful social dynamic; class warfare.

Armies, of course, have always been class conscious, usually more so than other elements of the society. In Asia the sense of class distinction stems in part from traditional distaste for war and fighting men, a reflection of Buddhist influence, and in part from the traditional Chinese social heritage, which places the soldier on the lowest rung of society's ladder.

Society and PAVN

The obligation of the Vietnamese society as a whole to PAVN is, in theory, total and unlimited. As the new constitution puts it: "The task of protecting the Vietnamese Socialist Fatherland is a sacred obligation and a lofty privilege for all citizens."¹³ In practice, this means military service. The social duty to serve in the armed forces long predates the advent of communism. Vietnam's early armies were large for such a small country. The Emperor Gia Long, for instance, commanded a force of 140,000 men and 100 ships. Conscription methods were similar to the *corvée* labor principle in that village councils were required to supply conscripts according to a fixed population ratio; in Annam the ratio was one *linh* (soldier) for every three villagers; in Cochin China, one for every five; and in Tonkin, one for every seven.

No formal conscription process was used in the Viet Minh War against the French although much social pressure was exerted in the villages controlled by the Viet Minh. Also, the basic appeal of nationalism was much stronger then than it was later.

Universal military service in North Vietnam was ordered by the Party's 12th Plenum in March 1957. A military draft system was devised and tested for two years in Hai Duong, Nghe An, and Ha Nam provinces, then introduced into parts of most other provinces in North Vietnam, and finally promulgated as law in April 1960.

The new SRV (1981) Constitution sets forth the individual's responsibilities toward the armed forces. The key article is Number 77, which stipulates that "citizens are obliged to do military service and to take part in the building of a national defense force," while Article 52 asserts that the State must "stimulate the people's patriotism and revolutionary heroism" in the process of enforcing compulsory military service.

The current operative statute on military service in Vietnam is the Military Obligation Law approved by the National Assembly on 30 December 1981. It was designed to "concretize Articles 52 and 77 of the SRV Constitution." Under the new law there are no exemptions to military service, although there can be deferments.¹⁴ Says the law:

Military obligation is mandated by law and is a glorious task for a citizen. . . . All male citizens from all rural areas, city districts, organs, state enterprises, and vocational schools from elementary to college level, regardless of the positions they hold, if they meet the induction criteria of the annual state draft plan, must serve in the armed forces for a limited time in accordance with the draft law.¹⁵

With the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, it was assumed in Vietnam, even in official circles, that the draft would be curtailed, and, in fact, that was the case for a few months. However, conscription soon was reactivated in the North. In 1976 registration of southerners for military service began, although it was more a control measure than a search for manpower. A "volunteer service" drive began in 1977 among southerners, billed as a means whereby southern youth with suspect social background could establish themselves with the new regime.¹⁶ A new general registration campaign was ordered in the South in January 1978 for all males aged eighteen to thirty-five, including those already in PAVN but on reserve status (apparently to pre-

vent draft dodging). Late in the year a major nationwide mobilization program was launched and military service formalized. Men in the draft-age group were told that if they enlisted by 22 December 1978, they would serve two years exactly. That order, however, was superseded by the General Mobilization Order of 5 March 1979, following the Chinese border incursion, which kept all PAVN members in uniform indefinitely; at this writing it still is in effect.

The General Mobilization Order ended some of the previous restrictions on drafting southerners. Prior to it no southerner was admitted to PAVN unless he had a "clear" history, which meant he had to be a proletarian with no significant connection with the previous government. The exact criteria now are not clear; apparently they are flexible and vary according to need. Former ARVN enlisted men and noncommissioned officers are being drafted, but not ex-officers. The South also has been scoured for former ARVN technicians, such as telephone repairmen and airplane mechanics, who are assigned as civilians to PAVN installations.

Under the current basic statute—the December 1981 law—registration for military service by all males is voluntary at age sixteen and compulsory at age seventeen. Women may register if they are members of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union. The draft age is from eighteen to twenty-seven years, and the enlistment period is three years for ordinary enlistees, four years for technical specialists and navy personnel, and two years for certain ethnic minorities. All categories may be drafted.

The draft is administered by PAVN itself. It issues draft calls twice a year. These are accompanied by enlistment campaigns—efforts to persuade youths to volunteer rather than wait for conscription—called "patriotic emulation" campaigns. These involve mass-media appeals using themes such as the "call to sacred union," and the exhuming of Vietnamese heroes and martyrs from the past as inspirational models. Recruiting drives are conducted by specially trained PAVN cadres, most of whom are veterans of the Kampuchean campaign. They meet with prospective soldiers in school yards to deliver lectures and show films. A quota is set for each province, by village and urban ward.

More commonly than not, apparently, quotas are not met. A

6 December 1984 *Nhan Dan* editorial said that since 1979 only twelve provinces in the country had fulfilled the draft quota for five consecutive years. These were mostly rural northern provinces.

Once registered, a youth is assigned a military service classification. The system was fixed originally in the 1960s and apparently remains the same today. Draft classification ranges from A-1 to B-3. Initially only A-1 categories were inducted, but as the Vietnam War continued, physical and social requirements dropped.

Given its apparent anticipated military manpower needs, Vietnam's manpower pool is not overly abundant. The current (1983) estimate of its resources is about 6.4 million males of military service age, that is, between fourteen and fifty. (See chart) Under the still current General Mobilization Order, PAVN is believed to be drafting some 200,000 men per year. While the total size of PAVN is ascertainable, estimates on the number drafted and number released each year are based on fragmented information and are not reliable. The best evidence suggests that in the first years of the 1980s, about 100,000, and possibly as many as 200,000 men were being released annually, having reached their upper forties (with age fifty apparently the firm cutoff date, except for senior field grade and general officers). The manpower crunch will ease somewhat early in the 1990s when the so-

PAVN Manpower Resources (January 1983)

Age Group	Total Males	Fit Males
15-19	1,290,000	814,000
20-24	1,098,000	639,000
25-29	1,130,000	667,000
30-34	1,020,000	561,000
35-39	780,000	521,000
40-44	624,000	450,000
45-49	503,000	231,000
	TOTAL	
15-49	6,445,000	3,883,000

called postwar (i.e., post-1973) baby boom begins to make itself felt.

In order to make military service more equitable, and perhaps more acceptable, a system of options was instituted in the late 1970s called the "Three Selects Program" and the "Six Opens Program." In the first program, the three who can "select" or have a voice in who is drafted are the family, the local mass organization (Fatherland Front) and the production unit such as commune or factory. The "six opens" program essentially consists of posting information about draft procedures along with lists of draftees, deferments and the names of Party officials' children and their draft status. The purpose is to allow everyone to know who is and is not being drafted and why.¹⁷

The December 1981 service law also attempts to end favoritism in deferments. Its enactment signaled an emulation campaign to induce Party officials to encourage their sons to set an example and join PAVN. A system of family perquisites was established as an inducement—families whose sons join PAVN are afforded special means to unsnarl legal or class status, get work papers and added food rations, receive permission to return from New Economic Zones and obtain other advantages. The new law also cracked down on procurement of false military discharge papers, which apparently had become and continues to be a big business in Vietnam. Counterfeiters are said to get as much as \$400 for a well done discharge document. Two such counterfeit rings, one in Ho Chi Minh City and the other in Haiphong, were broken up in 1981 and two of the five defendants sentenced to death.¹⁸

Reliable information on draft resistance is difficult to obtain, although if Vietnamese refugees are to be believed, it is commonplace and socially acceptable in the South. Vietnamese youth, they say, are strongly anti-war, especially the better educated. Parents oppose service for their sons in Kampuchea and there have been demonstrations and protests over conscription in the South in the 1980s. Many youths see service as a form of corvée labor in the New Economic Zones. Others fear they will be sent to fight, not in Kampuchea only, but also in Thailand; tatoos have appeared on the arms of some southern youths: "Born in South Vietnam, Died in Thailand." Much of the initial difficulty

with the ethnic Chinese in the South in 1977 stemmed from resistance by young Chinese to PAVN service. The most common evasion is what is termed "irregular compliance," which is simply not to register in the hope that the cumbersome State bureaucracy will fail to catch up with the individual. It is reliably estimated that 20 percent of all youth in the South do not register, and perhaps as many as 5 percent in the North. Some evasion is what might be called institutional, carried out not by the individual but by his commune or factory which does not want to lose his services and protects him from the local draft board. Since the quota system is employed, a tactic the factory can use is to supply a substitute known to be in bad health who then fails the physical examination.¹⁹

A different kind of opposition to the present draft law comes from within PAVN itself. Party officials tend to look on PAVN as a mechanism for politicizing southern youth, and line commanders in Kampuchea reportedly have complained that this results in higher desertion rates and generally less-dependable performance on the battlefield. This attitude has been reflected at the High Command level.

To enforce the social responsibility of each to serve in PAVN, the security *apparat*—chiefly the People's Security Service (PSS)—maintains a continuing campaign to round up draft dodgers and deserters. Early in the postwar years it was largely a pro forma effort, but in March of 1982 the National Assembly passed a new anti-draft-activity law that put teeth into the enforcement effort, including a mandatory five-year jail sentence for draft dodging.²⁰ The PSS also has established special teams called Bandit Hunters (*San Bat Cuop*), which track down deserters and draft dodgers. Refugees from Vietnam report that in Ho Chi Minh City the teams use former American Embassy vehicles with SBC lettered on their doors for their patrol work. The teams raid coffee shops, noodle stands, and other likely hangouts for deserters and evaders. There also is a policy of retribution against a draftee's family if he fails to report; his parents can be jailed and their home and other property impounded until he reports for duty. This effort against deserters and evaders is part of a broader emulation campaign called the Sweeping Away the Negative Phenomena Campaign that is designed to build greater public support for PAVN.

PAVN and Society

In addition to its proletarian nature, there is a second characteristic that distinguishes PAVN from noncommunist armies. It is the underlying nonmilitary rationale for its existence. Especially in its early days PAVN was assigned a multiplicity of roles to play that involved a breadth of activity stretching across the entire social scene. The most important dimension was, and is, economic.

The differences between communist and noncommunist armies of the world, so stark earlier in this century, are now diminishing as the two types move toward congruence. Much of this movement is by the communist armed forces. In the USSR by the end of World War II Russian patriotism had largely replaced proletarian internationalism as the Red Army's official motivating force. The Chinese PLA's drive for modernization appears to illustrate the same process at work. Increasingly, with respect to mental outlook, military training, necessary martial skill, and similar characteristics, the armies of the world are coming to resemble one another. Such is the trend with PAVN, although it continues to carry around a good deal of excess baggage.

PAVN's first and foremost mission, of course, is defense of the Fatherland. It requires loyalty, dedication, military skill, and, depending on rank, knowledge of strategy and military science. In this, PAVN resembles all armies. The Party's Fifth Congress in March 1982 set down a sharpened or restated national defense task:

To concentrate on building the nation to ensure that it is strong in all domains . . . sparing no effort in building an all-people national defense and a firm and strong people's armed forces. . . . [We must] always satisfy promptly all requests from the front [that is, Kampuchea] especially for manpower and equipment for the armed forces. . . . People must encourage their sons and brothers to serve in their army, care for families of wounded and fallen soldiers, care for and provide material and spiritual assistance to military units stationed locally. . . . All officers and combatants of PAVN pledge they will develop the spirit of Dien Bien Phu. . . . They must train, must maintain iron-like determination to win, must scrupulously observe discipline, modernize, strengthen combat readiness, and promote singlemindedness among the army and the people. . . .²¹

PAVN's second basic duty is to ensure continuation of the present sociopolitical system, Party monopolization of political power, a duty to be performed even if it means sacrificing PAVN. This overwhelming commitment, with its transfer of value, has had secondary effects on the society at large—some deliberate, perhaps, and some inadvertent. In short, it has created a praetorian state. Communist Vietnam today is a deeply militaristic society, not in outward appearance, but in sociopsychological terms. An imperative of militarism runs through the entire society.

PAVN has a third mission, which is socioeconomic. It must contribute to the yet-unfinished restructuring of society, which in the North means the never-ending effort to create a classless society and which in the South means to "break the machine" of the stubbornly resistant southern social structure. Also, PAVN has purely economic duties—producing goods, helping to solve the country's many economic problems and generally contributing to the nation-building process. This requires personnel with nonmilitary abilities, both communicational (what is called "motivation skill") and specific production skills.

These three long standing missions now have been re-defined. With the end of the Vietnam War, PAVN generals were obliged to abandon their preoccupation with unification of Vietnam and look outward to the world. In assessing their future in the general geopolitical scene, and in planning to meet their fundamental mission of territorial defense and maintenance of security, they in effect reversed the role that they had so long played. Previously they were only concerned with defense of North Vietnam against air attack; in the South PAVN defended nothing and attacked all. After victory it was PAVN who had to defend fixed installations and assure territorial integrity against Pol Pot forays, then later against China, and internally against the resistance elements.

In terms of general policy making, PAVN senior generals appear to have ample voice in matters of major concern to them, such as size of the military budget, foreign relations geared to assuring continued military assistance and uses to which the armed forces are to be put.

The main service that PAVN performs for the society, beyond defense of it, is in the economic sector. Assigning troops to fulfill economic tasks is not unique to Vietnam nor to communist

armed forces,²² although the practice does appear to have reached new heights in PAVN. In the early Viet Minh War days, as guerillas in the hills, military units largely had to fend for themselves—foraging, living off the countryside and friendly villagers, and economically making do. In the South during the early part of the Vietnam War, there was at best a weak quartermaster system and individual units were required to practice what was called the “three-nine system,” that is, central authority would supply a unit with food for nine months of the year and leave it on its own for the remaining three months, when it could either garden or forage. This approach now is challenged by the rise of professionalism and the contention that soldiering is a full time job; that it is unfeasible for soldiers to engage in nonmilitary production activities.

At the end of the Viet Minh War, PAVN officially was assigned a dual task, military preparedness and nation building. Ho Chi Minh told PAVN in 1958 that it was expected both to produce food and help reconstruct the North Vietnamese economy. PAVN units raised rice, vegetables and draft animals, taught literacy classes and built dikes. In the decade from 1954–1964, PAVN contributed 11.6 million work days to dike construction, flood relief work and water conservancy projects; constructed 14,000 school buildings, and operated a number of large State farms, some of which were the most productive in all of North Vietnam.²³ This activity continued during the Vietnam War as a means by which PAVN could help alleviate some of its drain on the system. The severest wartime strain represented by PAVN had to do with manpower, as indicated throughout the war (and was easily traced) by the flow of men and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the South. It was evident early that, contrary to what might be expected, this flow did not correlate closely with military action; that is, intensive buildups in the South often were not followed by major military offensives. There would be buildup and no offensive or an offensive without previous buildup, indicating that traffic on the Trail chiefly reflected shortages and economic needs in the North. For instance, manpower would be taken from the coal mines for military service, resulting in a drop in coal production and a loss of foreign exchange (most of the coal was sold to Japan). Politburo officials responsible for eco-

economic programs would complain, eventually increase pressure, and miners would be pulled out of the army and returned to the mines. In a few months military manpower needs would intensify again and miners would again be drafted. Thus there was an ebb and flow of manpower, as well as of logistic supplies, quite independent of the needs of PAVN, which normally would have been the determinant.

The drawdown in the war after the signing of the 1973 Paris Agreements vastly eased the strain on the northern economy. Some elements in the Politburo assumed this was to become a permanent condition and made plans for PAVN's contribution to economic rebuilding. Others, including the High Command, assumed the lull was temporary and that there would be a return to full-scale war with its attendant full demands on the society. Thus, planning proceeded on two tracks for PAVN—new military retraining and new assignments in the economic sector. For about a year, from mid-1973 to mid-1974, there was a definite shift in PAVN activity toward economic duty. The 22d Plenum in early 1974 issued a long directive on PAVN's new economic role, which indicated serious intent by at least some in the Party. It was restated by the 24th Plenum directive in early 1975, but, of course, all of this was overtaken by events.

The 24th Plenum resolution became the first postwar directive governing PAVN's economic tasks. It stated:

The current strategic task for our army . . . is to be a fighting force and a production force. In addition to its principal tasks of building itself into a modern army ready to fight, and of maintaining public order and security, the army has the very important task of participating in production and in economic and national construction.²⁴

The Politburo's first postwar resolution on the subject, published 17 October 1976 (apparently issued several months earlier), spelled out the role in greater detail:

An important task of the armed forces now . . . is building the economy and building the nation. We must deeply inculcate the armed forces with the importance and significance of this task. . . . We must inculcate cadres and combatants with an awareness that both combat and labor are glorious so they uphold revolutionary heroism in productive labor, develop responsi-

bility and revolutionary spirit for their tasks. . . . We must overcome the erroneous views still prevalent among a number of cadres and combatants.²⁵

The Fourth Party Congress in December 1976 unveiled a new slogan for Vietnam—Economics Is in Command—and issued directives ordering the entire society, including PAVN, to dedicate itself to the “single strategic mission of carrying out the socialist revolution and building socialism.”²⁶ It was Vietnam’s brief moment of peace. PAVN’s revolutionary heroism was to be transferred from the battlefield to the economic sector. While it was to maintain its security functions, its major effort was to be directed toward economic production.

By all evidence PAVN units threw themselves into the assignment with enormous energy. In the North and South alike, troops busied themselves in a host of enterprises. An infantry regiment in Quang Ninh province opened a brick-making plant, while a regiment in an adjacent province launched a commercial chicken-raising enterprise that within a year was marketing 1,500 chickens annually. A naval supply unit near Can Tho was producing 50,000 liters of *nuoc mam* (fish sauce) per year. PAVN units were mining coal, managing POL lines, repairing civilian automobiles, erecting war memorials, building bridges, operating a children’s bed factory, and manufacturing ceramic tiles. Others were running a rubber plantation, growing rice, raising swine, and marketing animal manure. A PAVN division in Cuu Long province opened a 1,200-hectare farm, and another operated a fish farm, producing two million fish a year. By early 1977 PAVN was on its way to becoming an economic system within an economic system. In 1983 *Nhan Dan* tabulated the results of four years’ production effort by PAVN: 140,000 tons of rice, 30,000 tons of meat and fish, and 363,000 tons of vegetables; construction or repair of buildings totaling 20 million square meters; manufacture of 40,000 tons of cement, 114 billion bricks, and 16 billion tiles.²⁷

PAVN’s economic duties are supervised by the General Economic Construction Directorate, established in 1976 (see Chapter 2 for description), which is the economic instrument of the Ministry of National Defense. It plans and administers production

work, negotiates contracts with other elements of the society, and supervises PAVN production organs and units in the field. Administration is chiefly at the Military Region level, each of which has what is called an Economic Department. In some regions this amounts to big business—one reportedly manages twenty-two State farms and fifty agricultural stations.

Reading between the lines of the military journals, it is clear that not everyone in PAVN is enthusiastic about the idea of economic duty. The main argument against it appears to be that it detracts from the central PAVN duty of defending the country, which is seen as a full time job. Others complain that economic duty “dissipates the thoughts” of soldiers, undermines tight military discipline, and is a potent source of corruption. The troops themselves complain most frequently about assignment to water-conservancy projects, a job that apparently consists of digging miles of ditches by hand, the most hated of all economic duty.

The main postwar rationale for retaining a large army assigned to economic work rather than demobilization lay in the cost of converting a job from the military to the civilian sector—about \$5,000 to provide the production center, equipment, and so forth. It was argued that it was more efficient to retain, say, a construction battalion in uniform than to convert it to a civilian institution.

A second rationale, advanced by General Giap and others at the time (1976), was that economic duty was an inherent part of PAVN’s defense of the country. The reasoning offered was this: PAVN’s domain is national defense, and successful defense is possible only if Vietnam is made a powerful country. Vietnam can become a powerful country only through economic development. Therefore, one of the military’s chief tasks is to contribute to economic development. Giap wrote:

If we want to build a strong nation and a powerful army we must have a strong economy and a modern industrial plant . . . to supply the arms and means of combat. . . . Engels once said, “Nothing is more dependent on the economy as a prerequisite than the Army and the Fleet.” Armaments, organization, strategies and tactics depend first of all on production. Only with modern industry will there be iron and steel to produce weapons. . . . Only with modern communications and transport will

we be able to respond to the army's great need for mobility. We cannot talk of high combat readiness and a strong national defense without a strong economy. Only with a strong economy is a strong national defense possible. Therefore the economy, national defense, economic development and combat readiness, all are one.²⁸

Thus PAVN not only accepted a role in the economic life of the country, it staked out a central claim. PAVN's soldiers, said General Giap, would fight the "bloodless war" of economic development, as the "shock troops" of the economic sector.²⁹ One of the most detailed descriptions of PAVN's economic assignment came from Gen. Hoang Van Thai, a deputy minister of National Defense then in charge of PAVN's food production activities, speaking to a conference in Ho Chi Minh City:

As you know the Politburo issued a resolution on military participation in economic construction that states that in the new stage the army must perform two strategic tasks: stay combat ready at all times, and positively carry out the [military's] economic tasks. . . . The army's economic tasks are to carry out large-scale socialist production in strategic areas [that is, NEZ areas along the border] and in sectors of economic importance [including] . . . agriculture, land reclamation, water conservancy, road and rail line construction, and capital construction. . . . The army has these three objectives: to build a prosperous and powerful country, parallel to building a strong national defense system; to train military cadres and combatants in science and technology, advancing the modernization and standardization [of PAVN]; to contribute to general social reconstruction and redistribution of the country's labor force.³⁰

The Politburo resolution to which General Thai referred was accompanied by a Council of Ministers directive spelling out the schedule PAVN was to follow in production and economic development work. In descending order, priority was assigned to:

1. Construction work (build factories, homes, public buildings).
2. Transportation and communication (PAVN troops were to build roads; widen, straighten, and make all weather the Ho Chi Minh Trail (now called the Truong Son Highway); work on the north-south railroad line; build airfields; dredge harbors and build port facilities).

3. Agriculture (operate State farms, grow rice, produce lumber, produce fish, perform water-conservancy and land-reclamation work. Troops also were expected to feed themselves six months of the year, each unit managing its own farm, as in the Viet Minh days).
4. Manage the New Economic Zone areas (clear land, relocate people, assist in administering the NEZ).

The question of broad PAVN involvement in widespread economic activity for the present appears to be academic, since PAVN's military missions limit such duty to meeting its own pressing economic needs, chiefly food. PAVN units not engaged in combat today all have what Americans would call "victory gardens." Said Radio Hanoi:

Producing grain and food is now the pressing demand for our army . . . Only combat and combat-preparedness tasks take priority over this. . . . Each unit must plant grain and food crops and raise various species of livestock. . . . Every unit can adopt 'around the house' [i.e., victory garden] production of crops and animals. Every unit, every cadre and combatant must learn about soil, fertilizer, how to grow plants to increase food ration. Norms must be established for every cadre and every combatant . . .³¹

Apparently, however, the idea of PAVN becoming a more or less self-contained production entity has taken root in Vietnam, at least to the extent of categorizing factories and agricultural production centers in the country as separate military enterprises. PAVN is now engaged in production of some weapons and military hardware, although the extent of this is difficult to determine. The term *national defense enterprises* increasingly is being used by the press and loosely defined as "production establishments of the army." The General Directorate for Technical Services operates what are called "national defense factories," which are noted in the press but not described; apparently they are vehicle assembly plants, ordnance plants, and perhaps others. These are given code names in press references—for example Factory Z-751—and not further explained.³² Vietnam at best still has only limited military hardware production capability; far less, for example, than North Korea. It is and will remain dependent on the USSR in this respect.

The return to military duty in Kampuchea and along the China frontier did not free PAVN from its economic tasks. The Party's Sixth Plenum (July 1984) issued a directive criticizing PAVN's failures in the economic sector and ordered stepped up efforts in road and bridge construction, capital construction and food production.³³ Long range planning calls for it to return to the intensive 1975–76 level. State planners incorporate PAVN elements into future Five Year Plans. For example, it is envisioned that a regiment will enter into an economic contract with the state (that is, central level ministries or provincial level agencies) much as is done now by the agricultural collectives and construction enterprises. The prospect is that some day a million-man labor force—formerly an army—will in effect go into business for itself. Uniformed men will be building roads and bridges alongside civilian construction crews; soldiers will be growing rice or raising water buffalo on a state farm next to a civilian agricultural collective.

It is not easy to evaluate the benefits of such long-term massive participation by the military in Vietnamese economic development. One argument in favor is that PAVN military units are well organized, a disciplined labor force that would be highly efficient in an economic context. Another is that the units possess a collective skill which should be retained. These arguments have proven valid elsewhere. In the world socialist system there is considerable precedent for armed forces to engage in all sorts of economic ventures. In China the PLA now produces goods for its own use in its own factories, but also sends some 35 percent of its production, such as clothing and tableware, to the civilian market. On a train from Moscow to Leningrad in mid-1981, the author discussed with a Soviet acquaintance the phenomenon of the Soviet armed forces operating its own self-contained factory system and supplying itself with everything from missiles to mess kits. He said the system's reputation for quality control was so high that when the Kremlin needed first-rate consumer goods for some special purpose (he used the example of Olympic medals) it turned to the military, adding, "In the Soviet Union if you want something manufactured right you get the army to make it."

It does seem clear, in terms of the long-range economic development of Vietnam, that there can be no significant move-

ment without tapping the skilled manpower pool represented by PAVN, whether as military or through demobilization: The regime in 1975 deliberately deprived itself of the southern middle class and the ethnic Chinese technocrats, the two other major sources of the kinds of skills required for nation building. However, as long as PAVN is preoccupied with the Kampuchean insurgency and the China threat, it can not contribute much. Later, when these problems are settled, will be the time for decision on what role the military will play in economic development work.

From the standpoint of general economic rationality, certainly the notion that a military unit can grow rice more productively or build a bridge more efficiently than can its civilian counterpart is open to question. A military unit, after all, is designed for combat. Such is its orientation, and for that it must be kept trained and in a state of readiness. Further, such parallel institutions represent duplication and a more expensive means of economic development. From a strict cost-accounting standpoint, probably it would be better to demobilize a construction battalion, say, and convert it into a construction enterprise, for if it remains a military unit it is bound to be less productive. Soldier energies and attention will be drained off by military drill, weapons maintenance, and field exercises. While there is no doubt that a military unit can grow rice or build a bridge, the real question here is whether in economic terms it can do so more efficiently than a civilian organization.

An interesting and possibly significant dimension in the PAVN-economic-development relationship began to develop in 1983—the increasingly public vent that PAVN generals gave to the failure of the leadership to solve the country's many pressing economic problems. The irritation, reflected in muted but definite tone in military-press commentary on the economic scene, appeared mostly to express frustration. The sense of it seemed to be a belief that anyone, including the military, could manage the economy better than it had been managed in the postwar years.³⁴ Whether this could ever reach the point of triggering some decisive action by the military probably would depend on further economic decline. The same irritation, it might be noted, also was apparent among middle- and upper-level cadres within the Party *apparatus*.

Probably irritation cuts both ways, for certainly from the so-

ciety's standpoint PAVN represents a huge economic drain; for instance, an estimated 50 to 60 percent of the annual State budget is devoted to defense spending. Much of this expenditure is, in effect, reimbursed by the USSR. However, not all of it—the drain on the labor force, for instance—can be compensated by Moscow. Undoubtedly then there is widespread agreement in Hanoi that PAVN should do all it can to alleviate the burden it represents.

The real quarrel with respect to PAVN and the economy comes within the military leadership—a manifestation of the red vs. expert argument—between those who believe PAVN's participation in economic activities is proper and necessary and those who believe, at least, that it seriously impinges on the military's ability to meet its fundamental defense duties. As PAVN moves toward a postideological stage, this latter technological position will accumulate strength and influence.

Notes—Chapter 12

1. Dang Lao Dong Party directive, circa 1962.
2. Gen. Nguyen Chi Thanh, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 25 May 1963.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Nhan Dan*, 22 Dec. 1969.
5. Lt. Gen. Hoang Minh Thao, *Hoc Tap*, Feb. 1967.
6. *Nhan Dan*, 22 Dec. 1969.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Gen. Nguyen Chi Thanh, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 25 May 1963.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. Literally “poor for many generations”; however, this is a social, not an economic, classification, essentially having to do with the individual’s status in the village.
13. SRV Third Constitution.
14. The Council of Ministers decree of 9 June 1977 (carried by *Tin Sang*, 31 Dec. 1977) lists permissible deferments: Party officials, some professionals, certain individuals in essential industries, and the only remaining son in Hero Families (that is, the gold-star families)—all of whom are “permanently deferred.” Temporary deferment can be granted to breadwinners supporting three or more persons; high school students on a college track; college students in the equivalent of ROTC; and certain individuals in the New Economic Zones.
15. This is further explained in the editorial “Military Induction,” *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 25 Apr. 1984.
16. Maj. Gen. Nguyen Anh Bac describes plans for mobilization of southern youth into PAVN in “The Army’s Task in Economic Reconstruction,” *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, June 1976; he quotes a Party 24th Plenum resolution on the subject, apparently dated mid-September 1975. A *Nhan Dan* editorial, 2 Oct. 1975, termed this southern “conscription,” although there was not true military conscription throughout the South until 1978.
17. *Hanoi Moi*, 4 Mar. 1981.
18. *Tin Sang*, 7 May 1981, which reported a nationwide crackdown on counterfeiting of discharge papers, which were apparently being bought by PAVN deserters.
19. Maj. Gen. Nguyen Van Si, in a frank interview with *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 24 Aug. 1984 (JPRS SEA 84-168), acknowledged difficulties in enforcing the military draft in the South; he also listed methods being used to overcome the difficulties, chiefly communicational, such as the

order that each southern village must stage a "debate" on the value of conscription.

20. The Military Obligation Law (May 1981) fixes penalties for desertion as well as for bribing officials to obtain false discharge papers. Article 70 stipulates, "Military deserters will be prosecuted in accordance with the military discipline law or will be imprisoned for six months to three years. If the crime occurs during the time of war or under other serious circumstances, the punishment is fifteen years in prison." At the time the usual sentence for desertion was three years in prison, which continued the policy of leniency toward deserters that had existed since the Viet Minh War.

21. *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 7 May 1982.

22. PAVN derived its early assignment in this sphere from Chinese experience. The PLA Production and Construction Corps was founded in Sinkiang in the 1950s and by 1968 was larger than the regular PLA and composed chiefly of ex-Nationalist soldiers and overage PLA. Had the Kampuchean war not intruded, possibly PAVN would have followed the same course. The use of military forces for economic work, of course, is not exclusive to Asia. Most of the dam building and river diking in the United States in the nineteenth century was the work of the U.S. Army; West Point graduates in the first hundred years of the Academy were civil engineers.

23. Radio Hanoi, 20 Dec. 1975.

24. *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Jan. 1977; text of the Politburo resolution was carried by Radio Hanoi on 17 Oct. 1976.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Nhan Dan*, 5 Nov. 1976.

27. *Nhan Dan*, 23 Mar. 1983. For an interesting description of what economic production duty means to the individual PAVN soldier, see Erhard Haubold, "Their Job Is to Shoot, Breed Pigs and Build Power Plants: Vietnam's Armed Forces as the Nation's Big Classroom," *Frankfurter Allgemeine* (Frankfurt/Main) 1 Mar. 1984 (JPRS SEA 84-054).

28. *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 10 June 1982.

29. *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Jan. 1976, which indicates that the Economic Department originally was a combined PAVN-Party organ, personally supervised by General Giap. Later Giap left, and the department was reorganized and transferred to the Ministry of Defense.

30. Lt. Gen. Hoang Van Thai, Vietnam News Agency, 18 Oct. 1976. See also Gen. Bui Phung, "The Army's Production Labor and Economic Missions in the New Situation," *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, no. 1, Jan. 1981.

31. Radio Hanoi, 23 Feb. 1982.

32. See *Nhan Dan*, "On National Defense Factories," 4 June 1982. See also "National Defense Enterprises Must Engage in Producing Consumer Goods," *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 16 Apr. 1982. The concept of the national defense factory in Vietnam is discussed at length but guardedly by Lt. Gen. Le Van Tri in *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, Sept. 1984 (JPRS SEA 84-163). See also the editorial "National Defense Industry," *Nhan Dan*, 10 Sept. 1984 (FBIS *Asia and Pacific Daily Report*, 13 Sept. 1984).

33. Radio Hanoi, 23 Oct. 1984 (FBIS *Asia and Pacific Daily Report*, 31 Oct. 1984). See *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 11 Jan. 1984 (JPRS SEA 84-043), for Fifth Plenum (Dec. 1983) resolution on same subject.

34. An example of this rather rare public comment by the military on State and Party economic performances came in an editorial, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 12 Jan. 1983. It described Vietnam's lingering condition of economic stagnation and declared that "drastic new approaches" were required. The article was guarded but clearly revealed there is an important faction within PAVN that is becoming increasingly impatient with the nation's economic managers.

CHAPTER 13

The Vietnamese Veteran

The veteran in Vietnam today represents an extraordinary social force, one that permeates the entire society. It is second only to the Party in social influence, and its potential possibly is even greater.¹

The veteran does not exist as a bloc, nor is he organized as a social institution; yet his presence is everywhere and the fact of him is evident in a hundred direct and indirect ways. His continued overwhelming presence in the future is assured if for no other reason than sheer numbers.

A PAVN soldier becomes a veteran—although he is conventionally called a *revolutionary retiree*, not a *veteran*²—upon discharge from the armed forces.³ During the long Vietnam War, those discharged were only the badly disabled and some who had reached their fifties. The first months of peace, late 1975, saw some selective demobilization. About 80 percent of those who had been students and had been drafted out of technical schools and colleges were released to return to their education. Numerically, however, they were, at most, only a few thousand. In June 1976 the CMPC approved a demobilization order that permitted discharge of those who were considered overage as well as those in limited service (disabled who had been retained in the service). Based on age, 5 percent of PAVN should have been demobilized each year during the past decade. That has not happened, resulting in a “bulge” of overage personnel.

The exact number of Vietnamese from what was once North Vietnam who served in PAVN has never been published. Over the years the Hanoi press has not carried nationwide statistics on the veteran population, only a generalized description, of which this one is typical: “Statistics from eight provinces and cities in

the North list 17,000 families with more than one dead, 2,000 of which had at least three dead: of these, 3,000 families had all of their children killed in action.”⁴

The press does carry frequent references to veterans, particularly disabled veterans, at the provincial and urban level. In postwar years, for instance, it has reported that as of 30 March 1981, some 60 percent of all Haiphong disabled veterans had been placed in jobs; that the Nam Hai glass factory outside of Hanoi has 280 employees, almost all of whom are disabled veterans; that 1 out of every 4 persons working in Hanoi banks is a disabled veteran; that 60 percent of the office workers in a major Hanoi construction firm are veterans; that an SRV regional finance office has 100 amputees on its payroll; that 50 percent of the personnel in the Party regional office in Haiphong are veterans; that 80 percent of all the families in Thai Binh province count at least one war dead or military dependent.

These provincial-level statistics can be ranged against the known size of PAVN through the years, combined with data on PAVN casualties,⁵ then correlated by using standard demographic formulas to extrapolate a rough estimate of the total number of veterans. Such an examination indicates that probably 60 percent of the original (pre-1975) North Vietnamese male population saw service in PAVN and that the death rate among them was about 21 percent. The mathematics of this study is as follows: North Vietnam's population during the Vietnam War (that is, 1964–75) grew from sixteen million to twenty-five million. The median age during that time was about eighteen years, which means that the total number of adults (including children who became adults during that period) was about sixteen million, of whom half, or eight million, were males. At least 60 percent of those served in PAVN. PAVN casualties during the war, based on the same extrapolation process, were about 960,000. Probably it is a safe estimate that two out of every three male adults encountered in Hanoi today are veterans.⁶ Something of this same range of statistics applies to the South, the difference there being that the percentage of disabled persons (whether or not veterans) is higher, since war casualties in the South were much higher than in the North.

The significance of this extraordinarily large veteran popu-

lation and its meaning for the future are uncertain—perhaps it would be more correct to say the significance is as yet undetermined. However, several observations can be made that seem unarguable.

First, the sheer number of Vietnam veterans is a guarantee that the veteran will occupy a central role in the future social scene. PAVN today is the largest per capita armed force in the world (nearly five times larger than the U.S. Army). As the draft continues and is extended to the South, eventually Vietnam will have (if it does not already have) more veterans per capita than any other country in the world. Second, while the Vietnamese veteran clearly is a burgeoning sociopolitical factor in the society, it is too soon to estimate how institutionalized a force he may become. The Party and the Hanoi leadership, aware of the growing presence of the veteran, seek to head off institutionalization. They proscribe veterans organizations and, through manipulation of public opinion, work to prevent the rise of a veteran mentality or consciousness (as well as a corresponding antiveteran attitude). Probably this objective—veterans not acting as veterans—will prove unachievable and eventually the regime will seek instead to channel veterans' organizational energies.

The Party's initial postwar effort to come to grips with the question of the veteran in society was Plenum Directive 23 of July 1975. It ordered prompt resolution of Vietnamese missing-in-action cases; instructed local communities to prepare plans to accept and reintegrate large numbers of returning veterans; established a new Party control system to ensure that veterans and next of kin got the benefits due them; and launched a major agit-prop and emulation campaign to make certain that veterans "continue to have the proper revolutionary spirit," that is, do not become disgruntled and antisocial.

The general postwar approach by the Party and State toward the veteran is to treat him as a social problem that must be solved to the satisfaction of all. In general a threefold approach has been practiced: (1) constantly reiterating society's appreciation for the sacrifices of "our kith and kin who helped the tree of Revolution blossom with the flowers of victory," during various agit-prop and emulation campaigns; (2) providing disabled veterans and next of kin with special economic benefits and social privileges;

and (3) administering a well-organized effort to integrate the veteran back into society.

Official, which is to say Party, attitude toward the veteran in the early 1980s, however, seemed ambiguous, as if the regime were uncertain how to proceed. There have been a few indications of tightening up—for instance, an order that disabled veterans can no longer wear their distinctive lapel pin daily, as was the custom; now it can be worn only on national holidays. In general, however, Hanoi continues to treat veterans very gingerly, with what might be called the minimum necessary response.

The third observation is that the veteran influence, as it continues to grow in Vietnam, will tend to make the country more praetorian. A society composed chiefly of individuals with long military experience cannot help but take on certain martial characteristics, although not necessarily bellicose or militaristic ones. Every individual is a product of his social traumas and other social experiences—and society is the sum of these—hence, Vietnam, like certain other societies (such as Israel), is bound to take on unique characteristics that outsiders find singular if not peculiar.

The return of large numbers of demobilized PAVN soldiers—because of disability or age—to the villages of Vietnam has begun effecting change of only dimly perceived meaning. One change is what might be called the militarization of local government and Party organization, although perhaps “veteranization” of those institutions might be a better term. Gradually local government in the North is passing into the hands of men who have spent most of their adult life in uniform and a good deal of it in combat. Many are disabled. In 1969 it was noted that a third of all Party secretaries in local chapters were disabled veterans, as were 55 percent of all local-level production cadres and 36 percent of the managers of agricultural collectives.⁷ No statistics have been released recently, but the percentage must be higher today than in 1969. Almost all intermediate- and local-level Party officials are veterans, the majority disabled veterans. The adult managers of the Party’s youth element—the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Group—are exclusively retired military. Administrative posts in the educational sector apparently are re-

served for veterans. The effect this—the staffing of governmental and educational institutions with individuals who have undergone special traumatic experiences—will have is impossible to determine since it is so subtle and pervasive.

In part this has created a sinecure condition that is now regarded by the veterans as their right. The effect has been to fill educational and economic posts (at the commune level) with retired PAVN personnel who admittedly are often unqualified. Schools, even grade schools, commonly have a staff of up to a dozen retired military men engaged in political education that, according to those who have experienced it, consists chiefly in recounting war stories. Such activity, perhaps, is not such a serious drag on the educational system. Unqualified personnel in key economic positions, however, is another matter, for they can be a major impediment in economic problem solving. Soviet advisors in Vietnam in the 1980s have encountered this problem in various Soviet-funded aid projects and have attempted to persuade top Party and State officials to end the sinecure practice, with no success to date. In seeking that change, the Soviet advisors are up against a formidable lobby.

The State may deal cautiously with the veterans in policy terms, but it is lavish in public expressions of sentiment. July 27 is observed each year as War Invalid Day and is a major holiday with lavish ceremonies for the veteran, the theme of which is that those who served in PAVN were and are heroes and are to be treated as such. Typical of the tributes are the following, by Ho Chi Minh and Le Duan:

The fallen heroes' blood has further reddened the revolutionary banner. Their heroic sacrifice has made it possible for our country to bloom with independence flowers and produce freedom fruits. Our people will be grateful to the fallen heroes forever.⁸

The Party, the people, this generation as well as posterity, will be forever grateful to the fallen heroes who, with their blood and bones, opened a path to independence and freedom, prosperity and happiness toward a bright future of Socialism and Communism. . . .⁹

The year 1981 was designated Year of the Disabled Veteran in Vietnam and was observed with a wide range of activities su-

pervised by Nguyen Kien of the Ministry of War Invalids and Social Welfare.¹⁰

The veteran as a social concern or problem is defined officially in four dimensions: "The problem of soldiers killed in action, disabled soldiers, convalescing soldiers and the families of soldiers killed in action as well as active duty military personnel, is a political problem, an ideological problem, an emotional [psychological] problem and a social problem."¹¹ This phrase, describing the veteran as a *political, ideological, psychological, and social* problem, appears again and again in Hanoi statements on the subject.

General Party and State policy on veteran matters was set down by Ho Chi Minh in the 1960s. It is to make veterans and next of kin of war dead "materially content, spiritually happy, and provided with the opportunity to participate in socially beneficial activity."¹² The third of these objectives, "to participate in socially beneficial activity," was amended in 1971 to "contribute to the national salvation war" and again, at the end of the war, to "contribute to the building of socialism."

Veterans' affairs in Vietnam are a function of the Ministry of War Invalids and Social Welfare, equivalent to the Veterans Administration in the United States. It acts in its own right and also coordinates activities affecting veterans handled by the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Labor. For years the Ministry of War Invalids and Social Welfare was headed by Maj. Gen. Duong Quoc Chinh, a member of the Central Committee but a man with a checkered government career, having been fired from several earlier positions, including one in which he was responsible for the development of agriculture. He was considered something of a Party hack but had important Party connections. In mid-1982 he was replaced (apparently retired) by Lt. Gen. Song Hao, a far more important figure with a long and impressive record in the PAVN General Political Department, where he ran officer and Political Commissar training and indoctrination programs and conducted Party purges within PAVN. Under Gen. Song Hao are five deputy, or vice, ministers, some of whom are concerned with veterans' affairs (the others with public welfare). Le Tat Dac appears to be the most important of these. He heads the department con-

cerned with integrating demobilized military personnel back into society, and his authority therefore cuts across many jurisdictional lines. To Quang Dau, another deputy minister, heads a department of fiscal management, that is, pensions, called demobilized military personnel subsidies. Le Thu, who is active in women's organizations, heads the agency concerned with war orphans and war widows. Nguyen Thuyet, a high official in the Vietnam General Confederation of Trade Unions, is the chief official dealing with employment of disabled veterans. In the National Assembly the leading figure associated with veterans appears to be Tran Dang Khoa.

Much veteran activity involves the major mass organization, the Fatherland Front, and the key figure there appears to be an ethnic minority member (Montagnard) named Y Wang. PAVN maintains a paternalistic interest in its former personnel after discharge and that interest is officially a function of the all-important Directorate General for Political Affairs.

Each province has a Social Welfare Office, which includes a Disabled Veterans section. The office also handles certain problems involving nondisabled veterans and next of kin. The local level is the one at which the most meaningful veterans' institutions are found; in fact, by official definition, veterans are to be regarded as a local problem. The local-level system is triangular: a district-level Social Welfare and Disabled Veterans Office; a special Party group (in each village and every city ward) that looks after military dependents, families of war dead, and totally disabled veterans; and a host of local volunteer groups such as the Disabled and Convalescent Soldier Council (in collectives, State farms, schools, and so forth), Loyal-Responsible Teams (wives of active-duty military personnel), Party Youth Group volunteers, Fatherland Front subcommittees, and others.

There is no nationwide Vietnam veterans' organization, not even the kept-veteran group found in other communist countries, such as in the USSR and Yugoslavia. Apparently this is deliberate policy.

Specific policy on veterans is now fixed in the form of directives. An early directive made it "mandatory that no veteran be left unemployed." Quotas of jobs reserved for veterans were fixed for all economic enterprises. The tone of these directives is stern:

No family of any military man, alive or dead, is to be left without care. . . . Not a single family is to be left in difficulty, without adequate help, and no wife (of a soldier on active duty or of a badly disabled veteran), who has the ability to work is to be left jobless. . . . These are absolute requirements.¹³

The philosophical sense of all this is that veterans' affairs must always be kept in a broad social context. Veterans are not to be regarded as a bloc and must not be treated as one. From the earliest days the regime rather candidly expressed fear of the rise of what it termed a "war-widow bloc," that is, a demanding sociopolitical force that could become troublesome, even dangerous. This fear is part of the reason for offering substantial social welfare benefits in the form of preferential treatment in hospital admissions, priority school placement for children of war dead, rehabilitation and work-placement programs for disabled veterans, and various monetary benefits. It amounts to a concerted effort to protect veterans from economic and social isolation, which could cause them to coalesce into a powerful special-interest group.

Official public attitude toward the veteran, thus, is a mixture of appreciation and sense of obligation. Privately, among leaders, there is the worry that socioeconomic isolation of veterans could lead to formation of a vested-interest bloc. Efforts to manage public opinion and inculcate official views among the general North Vietnamese population were started early, pressed hard and were largely successful. However, the impact of a steadily growing number of returning veterans accompanied by occasional negative behavior by veterans themselves has resulted in something of a changed climate of public opinion. Since the end of the Vietnam War, particularly, travelers from Hanoi have reported witnessing incidents on the streets and in public places in which veterans—often disabled, sometimes drunk—beard passing civilians and remonstrate the inequities of war's sacrifice. It is not uncommon for a disabled veteran to leave a restaurant refusing to pay his meal bill. Letters to the editor from factory workers complain of "recently returned comrades . . . who make nothing but demands on their fellow workers." A 1984 Hanoi press report said that war invalids "frequently gather at markets, bus stations and theaters and disturb public order, harass innocent passersby and even meddle with security force agents investigating a case." It

warned that the sentence for this offense was three to fifteen years in prison, that disabled veterans were no exception, and that if convicted, veterans would also lose their disability pension and be stripped of all titles, medals, and honors.¹⁴

The phenomenon of the disgruntled veteran, of course, is not peculiar to Vietnam; indeed, it is experienced to some degree by all societies after all wars. The mood of the veteran in Hanoi—semialienated, tinged with bitterness—was captured in a poem written by a disabled veteran and published in a Party newspaper:

The Fatherland called you to go kill the enemy.
So you left your mountain village and sacrificed your youth.
As a beloved fighter for our native land
Your voice mingled with the shouts of the attack
That destroyed the enemy outpost, scored a combat exploit,
And lost your arm forever.¹⁵

Equally common, as elsewhere, is the nonveterans' backlash, resentment by home-front civilians subjected to discrimination when promotions, new jobs, and various social and economic privileges go to veterans.

These *attitudinal deviations*, as they are officially termed, are muted but widespread. They have been in existence for years and have long been the target of intensive agit-prop and emulation campaigns.

Among the attitudinal deviations addressed are (1) "backward thinking . . . people who [help veterans] so as to do them a favor," that is, as an act of charity; (2) "the attitude of . . . what can a mere village do," that is, the view that the individual is overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem and that rightfully the task belongs to Hanoi; and (3) "the viewpoint that causes actions to be taken without always realizing that there is a psychological [dimension] . . . relating to the feelings of many people," that is, an impersonal approach in implementing Party orders or applying state regulations.¹⁶

How successful the regime will be in managing public opinion with respect to veterans remains to be seen. Probably, based on past performance, this new problem represents no overt challenge, for in terms of communication controls, Hanoi has no peer anywhere.

Notes—Chapter 13

1. For general discussion of this subject, see the author's "The Veteran in Vietnam," a paper presented at the twenty-ninth annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, New York, N.Y. 27 Mar. 1977.
2. A note on terminology. The term *veteran* is not commonly employed, rather *revolutionary retiree*, as indicated, or *retired activist*. The disabled veteran is termed *war invalid*, *permanent war wounded*, or (if still hospitalized) *postwar wounded*. The war dead (that is, KIA) is termed *fallen hero*, *deceased war hero*, or simply *war hero*. Military dependents are termed *soldier families*, *cadre families*, or *combatant families*. For ease of usage here, only the common English terms are employed: *veteran*, *disabled veteran*, *war dead*, and *military dependent*.
3. There are four general categories involved here: (1) the veteran, that is, the healthy demobilized soldier; (2) the disabled veteran, perhaps 5 percent of the total labor force in Vietnam today, ranging in disability from 20 percent to 100 percent (those below 20 percent are not classified as disabled), with the average above 60 percent; (3) survivors of war dead, who are for the most part next of kin such as war widows, war orphans, and aged dependent persons; these number about 5 percent of the total population; and (4) military dependents of PAVN on active duty, who, strictly speaking, are not part of the veteran scene but whose affairs are so interrelated as far as social welfare and public treatment are concerned that it makes separation for analytical purposes impossible; these are the families of the one million regulars and the two to three million paramilitary.
4. Minister of War Invalids and Social Affairs Duong Quoc Chinh, report to a Dec. 1977 conference, quoted in *Vietnam Courier*, Jan. 1978.
5. The number of PAVN and PLAF killed during the Vietnam War has been estimated in the range of 650,000 to 925,000. While the higher figure is now widely accepted, the author is inclined to believe it is inflated. ARVN casualties were about 200,000 killed and three times that number wounded. Probably Hanoi's dead was double the ARVN figure; the wounded-to-dead ratio in the North was higher than 3:1. South Vietnamese civilian casualties were staggering: 465,000 killed and 935,000 wounded. North Vietnamese civilian casualties can be less reliably estimated but probably were about 25,000 killed and 75,000 wounded.
6. The United States has about thirty million veterans from four wars, about 13 percent of its total population.
7. *Nhan Dan*, 11 Nov. 1969.
8. Ho Chi Minh, quoted in *Hoc Tap*, July 1971, apparently a Viet Minh War reference.
9. Le Duan in Vietnam News Agency, 26 July 1974.

10. Veteran's Day, formally termed War Invalid and Fallen Hero Day, was formally reestablished in 1967 after having been first observed in 1947 but largely ignored in the period between the two wars. Now it is a major holiday, marked by ceremonies and observances throughout the country and by well-publicized visits of top Party and PAVN leaders to hospitals and at graveside ceremonies.
11. *Nhan Dan*, 24 July 1976.
12. Ho is quoted in Vietnam News Agency, 26 July 1974.
13. Tran Dang Van (State Planning Commission), "Providing Work for Discharged Veterans," *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 1 Mar. 1981.
14. *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 21 June 1984.
15. *Tuyen Huan*, Nov.–Dec. 1971.
16. *Nhan Dan*, 24 July 1976.

CHAPTER 14

PAVN and the Future

Looking down the road on which PAVN is traveling, we can make a cautious estimate of what lies ahead—for PAVN as a military force in the Southeast Asia geopolitical arena and for PAVN within its own dynamic world.

In sheer size, Vietnam's armed force dwarfs all of its ASEAN neighbors' armies combined. Its size alone, regardless of leadership intention, is sufficient grounds to give its neighbors legitimate worry, even the Chinese. PAVN is sufficiently powerful that, given the advantage of terrain, it could battle the Chinese army to a stalemate for a prolonged period, although not indefinitely. Concern is frequently and forcefully expressed throughout the region, a persistent questioning of why PAVN must be so large and why it must continue to grow in size year after year.¹

However, it would be a mistake to exaggerate PAVN's military prowess. The character and composition of PAVN—large numbers of foot soldiers with guerrilla war experience chiefly, limited air power, virtually no offensive naval capability—means Vietnam can not project force over a long distance, cannot, for instance, offer a credible threat to Indonesia. Probably it could not even defend its Paracel and Spratley Archipelago holdings against a determined Chinese assault. In strict strategic terms it is neither as awesome nor as threatening as its size suggests. We can conclude that, with the exception of Thailand, Vietnam does not represent a significant direct threat to its neighbors. Doubtless it could make mischief by funding insurgencies in the region, but that does not appear to be a particularly promising approach and, of course, is something that cuts both ways—its neighbors could fund the resistance in Vietnam.

This judgment holds, however, only outside of Indochina, that

is, beyond the boundaries of Laos and Kampuchea. Within that region Hanoi gives every intention of pressing toward eventual creation of a Federation of Indochina. It does not appear to be in a hurry to achieve this arrangement—PAVN is not in Kampuchea now for that purpose—and seems willing to wait if necessary until the next century to see it come about. But the present Hanoi leadership does seem determined to ensure that history moves in the direction of integration—from the “special relationship,” to the “alliance” that now exists, to confederation, to full federation.² This ultimate objective will determine, as it has in the past, Hanoi’s actions in Laos and Kampuchea. Its test there will be whether history is moving events in the general direction of amalgamation. The central policy problem for all of its neighbors is, and will remain, whether they can accept the idea of a single Indochinese state.

The characteristics of PAVN that we have examined throughout this book will continue as major influences in shaping the PAVN of the future. These include Vietnam’s martial spirit; the Party’s sense of newly acquired geopolitical prowess and capability; limitations imposed by economic stagnation and diplomatic isolation and an uncertain ally in the USSR; evolving strategic thinking on the proper use of force, whether its naked application as in Kampuchea or its more traditional form, the “revolutionary force” doctrine; a determination to modernize PAVN, which means changed characteristics of the officer corps; a never-ending battle against inefficiency and corruption in and out of PAVN; and, finally, the prospect of an inevitable generational change of military leadership.

Vietnamese society and its armed forces today are entwined in a symbiotic relationship. Both, however, are caught up in broader forces that neither can control. The greatest of these are time and change. Neither the present Vietnamese political system nor its armed forces is what their leaders would have us believe—modern Marxism in action—but rather an anachronistic brand of Marxism attempting something that is totally impossible: to deny the fact of change. Thus the Party-erected system in Vietnam lives today on borrowed time.

The great danger to the status quo within PAVN is not outright destruction but slow erosion—evolutionary change that is

neither intended nor in some instances even perceived. PAVN for years was part of the “northern convent society,” as Jean Lacouture so aptly described it. Then it became secularized and now is becoming professionalized. This is an indeterminate but inordinately pervasive kind of alteration—it changes career patterns and goals, value judgments and lifestyles. Many of these changes permeated PAVN from the South, the Land of Orange Tree Blossoms, says a famous song. Spartan values of austerity were contaminated by the seductive *cai luong* (yellow music), Vietnam’s equivalent to rock ‘n’ roll from the Mekong Delta. Particularly influenced were PAVN soldiers on occupation duty in the South. This was no simple lure of decadence or even the blandishments of a previously unknown consumer society. The impact came mainly because PAVN soldiers were vulnerable to the idea of social change. Outsiders, even southern Vietnamese, fail to appreciate how truly isolated from foreign thought were the average PAVN soldier and officer. Their system for years had protected them from outside ideas and influences. But there is nothing quite as overwhelming for the human mind, especially a young mind, as encounter with a new idea.

The phenomenon of change induced by the “southern influence” is fairly clear. The northerner, usually a PAVN officer, often the best and brightest, went South from his closed-circuit society inspired to bring “ideological assistance” to his benighted brethren by rescuing them from their own valueless society, by carrying them out of cultural bondage. He saw himself as a knight of purity going forth to battle the darkness. Once on the ground in the South, however, this simplicity dissolved. He encountered an entire new world filled with ideas that were not only abstractions but were concepts that nevertheless had been put into practice and worked—ideas about education, foreign investment, land reform, divorce, music, and scientific management. Some had ideological overtones but most were apolitical. Some suggested themselves for northern adoption, some not. In the early days, the greatest impact came in encountering the South’s rather sophisticated economic sector, core of which was the hated profit incentive, but which clearly delivered benefits. Almost everyone wore leather shoes. Soldiers rode into battle, or flew. There were electric fans, paved streets and indoor plumbing. Soldiers and

civilians alike had wrist watches and motorcycles and these things were not regarded as luxuries of the rich but as ordinary amenities. There was on hand \$15 billion in captured war supplies and equipment. The South was rich. While the political commissar's oft-enunciated explanation for the discrepancy between North and South—American neo-colonialism—might continue to be credible, its previous meaning, that there was only the Party way of doing things, was no longer believable. The PAVN soldier and officer were left with the inescapable conclusion that it was not true that there was only one road, the Party road, and only one way of doing things, the Party way. Gone was the elemental view of the struggle as one between virtue and vice, or that in problem-solving no choice was possible.

The political commissars in PAVN struck back hard at the "southern influence" in PAVN, seeing it as a problem in corruption and alienation, correctable by the previously dependable communicational and motivational devices. If it had been merely a matter of corruption or alienation this might have worked. But the system was up against the irresistible force of altered perceptions, and it could no more recall these perceptions from the minds of the PAVN soldiers and officers than it could order them to sit in a darkened room and *not* think about a white elephant.

Great potential pressure from the outside also threatens to affect PAVN and the Vietnamese society—the socioeconomic example of the rest of Southeast Asia. Most Asian economists and other observers believe that a great economic boom is coming to the entire Pacific region between now and the end of this century, that in the boom the region will replace western Europe as Number Two in the capitalist world, and the Southeast Asian nations (those in ASEAN) will recapitulate the earlier economic miracles accomplished by Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. If that happens—and it is likely that it will—what will be the effect in Indochina if it remains locked—as is likely—in economic stagnation and poverty? Almost certainly it will create a frustration and rage that will manifest itself either as some mad foreign venture or, more likely, internally, with the revolution turning on itself. The form it could take—would take if it happened at all—would be a PAVN-dominated change of the political system. The psychological base for such a change is already in place—Vietnam has become a praetorian society with a system

that already is highly martial. The military and veterans dominate the social scene by sheer numbers—perhaps two out of every three male adults. The military approach to problem-solving and social organization permeates the society. Thus the potential is there; the base is in existence.

Regardless of the exact direction the trend takes, it is clear that at the top leadership level even now, PAVN generals, both political and professional generals, exert extraordinary influence in the Politburo on political decisions in general and completely dominate the making of decisions on matters that directly affect the armed forces. This is a condition that could turn ugly.

Polish Syndrome

During the pessimistic 1930s it was fashionable among intellectuals to prophecy that the world and the people in it sooner or later would be forced to one of two choices: communism or fascism. In the 1980s there emerged a variant of this within the communist world, an interpretation of events that held that eventually Marxist societies and the peoples in them would be forced to one of these two choices: non-communism, defined as some quasi-capitalist social-economic system or Marxist “fascism,” defined as Marxism as interpreted, and run, by the Marxist military.

The scenario frequently envisioned was this: among the general population in a Marxist society, popular discontent over the inability of the regime to make economic progress leads to a revolt by the masses that splits the Party. In desperation, since it is the only force that can prevent revolution, that is, complete change of government, the military seize power. Overt military rule is established; it proclaims it is not Marxist and rules as such but actually is protean fascist, of the sort intended by Italian and German revolutionaries in the 1920s but betrayed by Mussolini and Hitler. It would be military rule, but not jingoistic junta government; rather it would be “fascism with a human face.”

This scenario commonly is projected onto the East European scene—especially Poland—but is plausible for Vietnam: the Party continues to decline, unable to solve basic economic and social problems. It becomes steadily more discredited. PAVN officers become increasingly restive, ever less sympathetic to Politburo charges that all problems are traceable to China, the U.S. and

counter-revolutionaries. Finally, PAVN generals feel impelled to move. They would be particularly inclined to act if they had before them the example of similar action in, say, Poland or the USSR. More in sorrow than in anger they would announce they were obliged to assume the directorship of the "revolution." They might or might not act in the name of the Party, depending on how tarnished its image had become. They would not be establishing a military dictatorship, they would say, but returning Vietnam to the true revolutionary path—one that was radical but also scientifically rational and technologically oriented, probably also mythic and millenarian. This would engender a bitter, probably bloody, factional battle within PAVN, resulting in a shakeout of the top military leadership.

Until recently the idea of any sort of military *coup d'état* in Hanoi was virtually beyond the realm of possibility, but no longer.³ Even so, the scenario envisioned above can be only hypothetical. What does seem to be certain is that the era of monolithism in Hanoi is passing. Divisive forces within the society, so successfully held at bay throughout the long years of war, are now loose. Vietnam is soon to be whipped by the winds of change. The focus of this storm when it comes—and this is equally applicable to PAVN—will be on the generational transfer of power. Around it will revolve the other forces for social change: party cadres disenchanted by a failed economy and the Party's explanations; the restive young longing for a freer, richer life; the veterans considering themselves as inadvertent victims; and, most of all, PAVN, rent by these forces of change yet seeking to stand against them.

The great imponderable in PAVN's future, which makes predictions virtually impossible, is the kind of generals to be thrown up by this generational transfer of power when it comes. PAVN will be in the hands of new figures about whom little is known. Since we do not even know who they will be, we can know even less about their intentions.

In sum, when thinking about PAVN's future, it is difficult to be anything but pessimistic. The forces that work to shape it into what it is to become—heritage, battle fatigue, various social traumas, and deleterious social influences—all tend to warp, to corrupt, to play to its worst instincts. The PAVN that is to be probably will not deserve welcome in Vietnam.

Notes—Chapter 14

1. *Bangkok Post* editorial, "The Biggest Army Still Wants More," 23 Dec. 1982, an expression of feeling typical throughout Southeast Asia.
2. For an authoritative expression of the Indochina "alliance" concept, see Gen. Hoang Van Thai's writings, particularly *Tap Chi Cong San*, Jan. 1982.
3. In mid-1983 refugees carried out of Vietnam a spate of rumors about an aborted *coup d'état* attempt. Earlier in the year he made a somewhat cryptic remark in an official interview, saying "In view of the present situation in the capital city, maintaining political security and ensuring social order and security have become especially important tasks of the armed forces." (*Hanoi Moi* March 12, 1984). He may, however, have been referring to ordinary counterrevolutionary activity, not a suspected *coup d'état*.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY OF VIETNAMESE COMMUNIST MILITARY TERMS

Military Ranks

Tan binh	Recruit
Chien si	Soldier; Combatant
Binh Nhi	Private
Binh nhât	Private First Class
Ha si	Corporal
Trung si	Sergeant
Thuong si	Senior Sergeant
Chuan uy	Third Lieutenant, aspirant
Thieu Uy	Second Lieutenant
Trung Uy	First Lieutenant
Thuong Uy	Captain
Dai Uy	Senior Captain
Thieu Ta	Major
Trung Ta	Lieutenant Colonel
Thuong Ta	Colonel
Dai Ta	Senior Colonel
Thieu Tuong	Major General
Trung Tuong	Lieutenant General
Thuong Tuong	Colonel General
Dai Tuong	Senior General

Early Terminology

Cac Doi Tu Ve Do	Red Self-Defense Groups
Tuyen Truyen Doi Vo Trang	Armed Propaganda Unit
Cuu Quoc Quan (not communist term)	National Salvation Army
chien thuat	(military) tactics
ky thuat	(military) techniques
ky thuat tac chieu	fighting techniques
phuong phap	(military) methods
hop dong cach danh	coordinated fighting methods
doc lap cach danh	independent fighting methods
Quan Doi Giai Phong	NLF Army
dia phuong quan	provincial forces
dia phuong quan	district forces
luc luong nhan dan tu ve	village forces
du kich xa	village guerrilla

can bo nam vung	undercover agent
dau tranh	struggle, struggle movement
dau tranh vu tranh	armed struggle
dau tranh chinh tri	political struggle
dich van	action among the enemy
dan van	action among the people
binh van	action among the military
chinh van	action among civilian (government)
khoi nghia	general uprising
quan	army, force
luc luong	force
nhân dân	people
tu ve	self defense
dia phuong	local, region

Government and Party Organs

Ministry of National Defense	Bo Quoc Phong
Ministry of War Invalids (& Social Welfare)	Bo Thuong Binh va Xa Hoi
National Defense Council	Ho Dong Quoc Phong
military court	toa an quan su
special military tribunal	toa an quan su dac biet
military organ of control	vien giam sat quan su
military region	quan khu

Other Military Terminology

Chien-Truong Mien Bac	northern theater
Quan-Doi Nhan-Dan	People's Army of Vietnam
Bo Tong Tham-Muu	PAVN General Staff
Tong Cuc Chinh-Tri	General Political Directorate
Ban Thanh Tra Quan-Doi	Minister National Defense Military Inspectorate
Bo Chinh-Tri Trung-Uong Dang	Politburo/Political Bureau
Quan-Uy Trung-Uong Dang	Central Military Party Committee
Chinh-Uy	Political Commissar
Tu-Lenh	Military Commander
Quan Dan Nhat Tri	unity of mind—people and army
Quan Doi Dang Lanh-Dao	Party-led army
Don Vi Dan Quan Tu-Ve Huyen	district militia/self-defense units
Quan Phuc-Vien	demobilized soldier
San Bat Cuop	bandit hunters (anti-draft dodger unit)
Tong Cuc Hau Can	Rear Services Directorate
Bo Tu-Lenh Quan-Khu	military region

Doan Thanh-Nien Xung-Phong	Youth "Rush to the Front" Organization
Bo-Doi Bien-Phong	Border Defense Force
Can-Bo	cadre/officer
Cuc Quan-Bao	Cuc Quan Bao
Cuc Lien-Lac Doi-Ngoai Bo Quoc-Phong	Minister Defense External Relations Dept.
Quan-Quit Voi Dan	intimately related to the people.
Qui-Dinh Thanh-Phan	To classify by social class
Thoi-Co	opportunity/chance
Nam Vung Thoi-Co	to seize the opportunity
Bo Lo Thoi-Co	to miss the opportunity
Xoi Mon	erosion
Doi Ngoai	Foreign Relations (Dept. of PAVN General Political Directorate.)
Bao-Ve	military security (Dept. of PAVN General Political Directorate.)
To-Chuc	organization (Dept. of PAVN General Political Directorate.)
Chinh-Sach	policy (Dept. of PAVN General Political Directorate.)
Tuyen-Huan	propaganda/training (Dept. of PAVN General Political Directorate.)
Phong Chinh-Tri	political offices (Dept. of PAVN General Political Directorate.)
To-Dang	Party cell
To-Truong	Party cell leader

APPENDIX B

ROSTER OF PAVN GENERAL OFFICERS

Note on General Officer Rank Designation

The *senior general* or *dai tuong* is the highest rank, wearing four stars and equivalent to general of the army. In some Vietnamese usage this rank is translated into English simply as *general*.

The *colonel general* or *thuong tuong* is the next highest rank, wearing three stars. Previously, when three star was the highest rank, this was often translated from the Vietnamese simply as *general*.

The *lieutenant general* or *trung tuong* is the next rank, wearing two stars and equivalent to major general in western armies.

The *major general* or *thieu tuong* wears one star and would be called a brigadier general in western armies.

The *senior colonel* or *dai ta* is considered to be of general rank and is distinct from *colonel* or *thuong ta*.

PAVN GENERAL OFFICER ROSTER 1984

The Senior Generals (See Biographical Sketches Below)

Vo Nguyen Giap
Van Tien Dung
Hoang Van Thai
Chu Huy Man
Nguyen Chi Thanh (deceased)

The Colonel Generals (See Biographical Sketches Below)

Chu Van Tan
Le Duc Anh
Le Hien Mai
Le Trong Tan
Song Hao
Tran Van Tra
Vuong Thua Vu (deceased)

The Lieutenant Generals

Bang Giang:	Early military figure; probably Montagnard (Tay tribe); mostly Viet Bac zone assignments.
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- Bui Phung: Important officer with long record of duty, almost all of it in rear services; considered "builder" of Ho Chi Minh Trail; assigned to logistic work in Kampuchea after 1979.
- Cao Dang Chiem: Central Committee member (4th Congress); served in South during war; security assignments in South after war.
- Dam Quang Trung: Major early figure (as Ho Chi Minh bodyguard); Montagnard (Tay tribe); member of first Armed Propaganda Team; reportedly commander of PAVN units attacking Hue during Tet 1968 (and responsible for Tet massacre). Commander of militia divisions fighting Chinese invasion in 1979.
- Dang Van Cong: PLAF general, commander of MR 7 in Vietnam War and again in late 1970s; command in Kampuchea in early 1980s.
- Dao Son Tay: Early Viet Minh officer; commanded forces in Saigon region during Viet Minh War; had artillery command in PAVN in last battle of Vietnam War; reported retired, living in Ho Chi Minh City.
- Dao Van Truong: Regimental commander at battle of Dien Bien Phu; had military commands in South during Vietnam War, chiefly in MR 7; was deputy commander of MR 7 in late 1970s; reported retired.
- Dinh Duc Thien: Major figure in PAVN rear services and in DRV/SRV industrial development; involved with USSR in liaison work, securing war supplies and materiel in mid-1960s; member of 4th Party Congress but dropped in 5th, supposedly because he was suspected of having Chinese sympathies.
- Doan Khue: Held series of PLAF and PAVN commands during Vietnam War, chiefly in Hue-Da Nang region; one of the major field commanders in Kampuchea after invasion in 1978.
- Dong Sy Nguyen: Politburo member (1982); trained as architect and construction engineer; most of his PAVN commands were in rear services; chief State assignments since Vietnam War include ministerial posts in construction, communication and transportation; travels extensively.

- Dong Van Cong: PLAF and PAVN commands in South during War as senior political commissar and later as tank commander; supposedly led PAVN invasion into Kampuchea in 1978 as commander of tank spearhead; deputy MR 7 commander in 1981; does considerable liaison work with USSR.
- Giap Van Khuong: Early PAVN Navy officer; deputy PAVN CO; apparently retired in 1979.
- Hoang Anh Tuan: PLAF and PAVN commander during Vietnam War; member of PRP delegation to Four Party Joint Military Commission in 1973; military attache duty after War.
- Hoang Cam: Long time "southern" general; held PAVN commands in South during War including MR 7 CO; commander of northeast sector of Kampuchea after 1978 invasion; member of 4th Party Central Committee; National Assembly delegate from Thanh Hoa.
- Hoang Minh Thao: Important senior PAVN officer; one of major strategists with PAVN in South during Vietnam War; has written extensively; member of 4th Central Committee (dropped in 5th Congress); commandant of PAVN Military Academy in 1980.
- Hoang The Thien: Had various military commands in PLAF and PAVN in South during War; postwar assignments in PAVN economic construction duties.
- Le Ngoc Hien: Important PAVN figure; has held major staff and headquarters assignments; one of three top commanders in Kampuchea invasion in 1978; travels extensively on military missions and good will visits.
- Le Quang Ba: Prominent early military leader from Cao Bang province; held important assignments during Viet Minh War; Montagnard (Nung) or possibly part Chinese; reportedly arrested in 1979 in crackdown that followed defection of Hoang Van Hoan.
- Le Quang Dao: Important PAVN general long associated with war in Laos; Central Committee member; ranking member of Hanoi Municipal Party CC; postwar assignments in Party youth organizations.

- Le Quang Hoa: Important early PAVN officer and one of the best educated; held chiefly political commissar posts; early editor of *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*; member of Four Party JMC in 1973; writes extensively.
- Le Quang Vu: Little known general who has held military intelligence posts during entire career; chief of Military Intelligence Dept. in late 1970s.
- Le Tu Dong: Relative newcomer to senior PAVN ranks; has held mostly military academy and military attache assignments; writes on strategy, particularly Chinese strategy.
- Le Van Tri: Important "technical" general; first assignments were in Missile Defense Force; postwar assignments in PAVN-operated factory system.
- Nguyen Don: One of most important "southern" generals who played key role in early PAVN affairs during Viet Minh and Vietnam Wars; faded into obscurity after the War; apparently retired.
- Nguyen Hoa: Major PAVN figure; considered still rising (born 1925); held major commands in South and in Laos during Vietnam War; postwar assignments to SRV technical posts; involved in oil development since 1980; member of Central Committee.
- Nguyen Huu An: Newcomer to senior PAVN level; has held series of training and emulation-motivation assignments; considered to be a "technical" general; long involvement with PAVN Inspector General Dept.
- Nguyen Minh Chau: Line commander in South during Vietnam War; major figure in Kampuchean war; commander of MR 7 since 1982.
- Tran Do: One of the most famous and larger-than-life "southern" generals; held combat commands throughout Viet Minh and Vietnam Wars; highly literate, writes both fiction and non-fiction extensively; postwar commands in Party and PAVN training and education.
- Tran Hai Phung: Latecomer to PAVN upper ranks; postwar commands have all been in South; commander of PAVN forces in Ho Chi Minh City since 1981; earlier assignments apparently in security field.

- Tran Luong: Early PAVN general and important “southern” general; may have been original member of Party (b. Quang Ngai, 1913); held major commands in Viet Minh and Vietnam Wars; no postwar record; may be retired or deceased.
- Tran Nam Trung: Early “southern” general whose name also used as alias by one or more PAVN generals; held series of important commands in South during War; PAVN security, then inspectorate assignments after the War; apparently now in retirement.
- Tran Quy Hai: Original member of PAVN; had line command during Viet Minh War and rear services and air defense commands during Vietnam War; PAVN judicial sector assignments since the War; apparently retired since 1980.
- Tran Quyet: Longtime PAVN general assigned to security duty within PAVN and State elements; writes on counter-revolution; apparently retired in mid-1970s.
- Tran Sam: Important “technical” general who has held mostly rear services assignments; expert on foreign aid with long record of association with China and USSR; apparently retired after Vietnam War.
- Tran Van Danh: A “southern” general prominent in South in both Viet Minh and Vietnam Wars; commanded PAVN forces in Saigon region after 1973; was member of 4-Party JMC; active in Party affairs at Ho Chi Minh City level since the War; member of National Assembly.
- Tran Van Quang: Early PAVN commander of late 1950s period, chiefly in Militia assignments; Vietnam War duties also with Militia; postwar assignments mostly hosting visiting military delegations; apparently also involved in current Laotian military affairs.
- Vu Lang: MR 3 commander in 1976; has written on military education in PAVN but little other information on him available.
- Vu Xuan Chiem: Rear services general; played major role in supply of PAVN in Kampuchea invasion.
- Cao Van Khanh (deceased): Early PAVN figure; held mostly training commands; represented SRV at Paris talks in 1969, died Oct. 3, 1980.

- Pham Kiet (deceased): Prominent early PAVN general; first PAVN intelligence service chief (1955); held mostly security commands; died Jan. 23, 1975.
- Nguyen Quyet: Long time PAVN general, considered to be father of PAVN Militia; writes extensively on militia and militia-manpower problems; commander of MR 3 and "district military fortress" experiment along China border in 1981-83.
- Nguyen Thi Dinh: PAVN's only senior female general; deputy commander of PLAF (as political commissar) during much of Vietnam War; member of Central Committee; apparently now retired from military duty although still holding State and Party assignments.
- Nguyen Van Vinh: At one time one of the top half-dozen PAVN generals, prominent in both Viet Minh and early Vietnam War periods; fell into disgrace, reportedly over Vietnam War strategy, and expelled from both PAVN and Party in 1972.
- Pham Hong Son: "Technical" general who has had mainly artillery commands and military education assignments; writes extensively on Marxist military theory; considered expert on warfare in mountainous terrain.
- Pham Ngoc Mau: Major senior officer in Party affairs within PAVN; most assignments as political officer in General Political Directorate; supposedly close connections with Soviet military advisors.
- Phan Khac Hy: "Technical" general with series of rear services assignments, most recently in Laos; member of Central Committee; helped administer Ho Chi Minh Trail logistics system during Vietnam War.
- Phan Trong Tue: PAVN general with maritime background; handled sea infiltration traffic in South during Vietnam War; has held State posts in transportation sector since War; member 4th Congress CC, but not 5th.
- Phung The Tai: Early PAVN general; assignments included Air Defense Force, PAVN Air Force and PAVN command in Kampuchea; member of 4th Congress CC, but not 5th.
- To Ky: One of the first southerners to rise to general officer rank in PAVN; long record with PAVN

and Party in Viet Minh War and, as first commander of PLAF, in Vietnam War; retired but appears at occasional functions in Hanoi.

Tran Ba Thanh:

PAVN intelligence officer who served for years as undercover agent (and ARVN officer) in South Vietnam; currently holds security assignment in South.

Tran Dai Nghia:

“Southern” general and “technical” general; held Party and State posts during Viet Minh War, procurement assignments during Vietnam War; believed retired.

The Major Generals

Bao Dinh Luyen, Air Force

Bui Thanh Van, MR 7

Bui Uy, Navy (Captain)

Chu Duy Kinh, Air Force

Chu Van Man, PLAF

Dan Thanh, Rear Services

Dang Kim Giang, Expelled 1972
(alleged coup plot)

Dang Hoa, Artillery

Dang Kinh, Engineers

Dang Ngoc Si, Special Operations
Command

Dang Vu Hiep, Political Commissar

Dao Dinh Luyen, Air Force CO

Dao Huy Vu, Armored Corps

Dao The Thien, Political Commissar

Dinh Duc Thien, Rear Services
(Kampuchea)

Dinh Van Tuy, Border Defense
Force

Doan Ba Khanh, Navy CO

Doan Tue, Artillery Branch CO

Duong Cu Tam, Defense industry
liaison

Ha Ke Tan, Deceased

Ha Ngoc Tien, Police command

Ho Ba Phuc, MR 9

Hoang Dan, PAVN Military
Academy

Hoang Dien, PAVN Staff

Hoang Kien, Rear Services Academy
CO

Hoang Minh Thi, Deceased

Hoang Ngoc Tien, Border command

Hoang Phu, Missile command

Hoang Sam, Deceased

Hoang Tra, Navy

Hoang Van Bao, Communications

Hoang Van Khanh, Air Defense
branch

Hoang Lam, MR 4

Hong Mao, PAVN Training

Hong Phong, MR 1

Huynh Cong Than, Artillery

Huynh Dac Huong, Political
Commissar

Huynh Thu, Border Command CO

Huynh Van Nghe, Deceased

Le Van Chan, PLAF

Le Chieu, Director PAVN Museum
(Hanoi)

Le Hai, Air Force (fighter defense)

Le Hong Lam, MR 7

Le Khac Hy, Rear Services

Le Linh, MR 2

Le Nam Phong, Quyet Thang Corps
CO

Le Ngoc Huyen, Dept. Chief of Staff

Le Quoc San, MR 8

Le Tha Chung, Navy

Le Thanh, Military attache, Moscow
 Le Thiet Hung, Training command
 Le Van Tuong, Air Force
 Le Xuan Luu, PAVN Political Academy CO
 Lu Giang, Hanoi Capital Military Region CO
 Luong Nhan, Rear Services
 Luong Tuan Khang, MR 3
 Luong Van Nho, MR 7
 Nam Khanh, Political c Vom Commissar
 Nam Long, Pa PAVN Military Academy
 Nguyen Ba Phat, Navy (Sea command)
 Nguyen Chanh, Rear Services (Kampuchea)
 Nguyen Chon, Border command
 Nguyen Cong Trong, Navy
 Nguyen Duong, Finance branch
 Nguyen Hong Lam, 7th MR.
 Nguyen Huan, Engineers
 Nguyen Huy Chuong, Political Commissar
 Nguyen Minh Chau, B-2 command (Vietnam War)
 Nguyen Nam Khanh, Psychological Warfare
 Nguyen Nang, PAVN Advanced Military Academy CO
 Nguyen Sam, Rear Technical Services
 Nguyen Sung Lam, Border command
 Nguyen The Bon, Deputy Chief of Staff
 Nguyen Trong Vinh, PLAF
 Nguyen Trong Xuyen, Deputy Commander, MR 3
 Nguyen Trung Kien, Artillery Command
 Nguyen Van Luan, Police Command
 Nguyen Van Nam, Military court
 Nguyen Van Nghiem, PLAF
 Nguyen Xuan Hoang, Military

History Institute CO
 Nguyen Xuan Mau, Radar command
 Nguyen Xuan Yen, Recruiting and training
 Pham Ngoc Loi, Political Commissar
 Phan Khac Ky, Rear Services (production)
 Phi Trieu Ham, Capital Military Command
 Ta Xuan Thu, Deceased
 Tam Phuong, MR 9
 Thai Dung, Officer training
 Thung The Tai, Deputy Chief of Staff
 Tran Ba Dang, Engineers
 Tran Chung, Deputy Chief of Staff
 Tran Dinh Cuu, MR 7 (Kampuchea)
 Tran Hanh, Air Force
 Tran Kinh Chi, Director, Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum
 Tran Nghiem, MR 9
 Tran The Mon, Political Commissar
 Tran Tho, Rear Services
 Tran Van Giang, Navy
 Tran Van Phac, Recruiting and training
 Truong Cong Can, Political Officers School CO
 Vo Bam, Rear Services (Ho Chi Minh Trail)
 Vo Van Thanh, MR 9
 Vo Vanh Vinh, Medical Corps
 Vu Lang, PLAF
 Vu Van Can, Medical Corps
 Vu Van Don, Rear Services (Transportation)
 Vu Yen, MR 4

The Senior Colonels

Bach Ngoc Lien
 Bui Cong Ai
 Bui Van Thiep
 Bui Xuan Nho
 Cap Xuan Diem
 Chu Thanh Hong

Dang Van To	Le Tien Thinh
Dao Huu Lieu	Le Tu Thanh
Dao Van Xuan	Le Van Chi
Dinh Quy Cong	Le Van Ngoc
Dinh Van Khanh	Le Van Tan
Do Dinh Tung	Le Xuan Kien
Do Hoai Nam	Luong Huu Sac
Do Hoang Mao	Luu Van Loi
Doan Chuong	Luu Ba Xao
Doan Phung	Luu Vu Suy
Duong Han	Mai Chi Nhan
Ha Kien Thiet	Mai Nhan
Ha Quang Ba	Nam Thang
Ha Quoc Toan	Nguyen Dang
Ha Trung Hy	Nguyen Dinh Sanh
Ha Van Lau	Nguyen Dinh Tung
Ho Quang Hoa	Nguyen Dung Chi
Hoang Cao	Nguyen Duy Thai
Hoang Dinh Phu	Nguyen Ich
Hoang Ha	Nguyen Minh Chau
Hoang Kim	Nguyen Nam Thang
Hoang Le	Nguyen Nho
Hoang Minh Phuong	Nguyen Phu Chut
Hoang Niem	Nguyen Quang Hung
Hoang Van	Nguyen Sy Quoc
Hong Son	Nguyen Tam
Huynh Van Nghiem	Nguyen The Tung
La Van Cau	Nguyen Trung Kien
Le Duc Anh	Nguyen Tuan
Le Cu	Nguyen Truc Mau
Le Dinh Ly	Nguyen Van Lang
Le Dinh So	Nguyen Van Nam
Le Dinh Thiep	Nguyen Viet
Le Don	Nguyen Viet Phuong
Le Duc Tiet	Nguyen Xuan Dao
Le Duc Hon	Nguyen Xuan Hoa
Le Hien Huu	Nguyen Xuan Thang
Le Hop	Pham Hoang
Le Khoa	Pham Nhu Vuu
Le Minh Tuan	Pham Quang Can
Le Nam Thang	Pham Thanh Tam
Le Ngoc Chau	Phan Han
Le Ngoc Quang	Phan Quang Tiep
Le Ngoc Tan	Phan Tu Quang
Le Quang Ngoc	Ta Dien Hieu
Le Quang Viet	Thach Tam

The Bon
To Xuan Kha
Tran Chi Cuong
Tran Chi Hien
Tran Cong Man
Tran Hieu
Tran Huy
Tran Man
Tran Nguyen Do
Tran Quan Lap
Tran Quang Khanh
Tran Quynh
Tran Van Banh
Trieu Minh
Trinh Hoang Dinh
Trinh Hong Thai
Tu Giai
Van Dien
Van Duy
Vo An Dong
Vo Van Dan
Vo Van Mon
Vu Chi Dao

Vu Dinh Hoan
Vu Duc Thai
Vu Hien
Vu Nho
Vu Van Don
Vu Xuan Vinh

Deceased Senior Colonels

Cao Van Ngay
Dang Tinh
Ho Hoc Hai
Hoang Van Lan
Le Cao Thang
Le Van Nhieu
Le Van Ton
Mac Ninh
Nguyen Dinh Tac
Nguyen Tam Thuong
Nguyen Van An
Nguyen Van Tan
Phan Kim Bang
Phan Thanh Nha

BIOGRAPHIES OF SENIOR GENERALS

Vo Nguyen Giap

Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap was, and is, the only PAVN figure known at all well outside of Vietnam, the only PAVN general mentioned in most accounts of the Vietnam War, and the only Vietnamese communist military leader about whom a full length biography has been written. The disparity between General Giap and the others—the lone figure standing in the forefront of a legion of shadowy Vietnamese communist generals—assures him a prominent place in Vietnam's history. But history's judgment on him, as general, is yet to be rendered.

The three horses pulling the chariot of war are leadership, organization and strategy. The ideal general in any army would possess to perfection each of these in careful combination. Evaluating the performance of General Giap, therefore, must be in terms of his performance as leader, organizer and strategist, all three. While the jury is still deliberating, this much about him seems reasonably clear: he was a competent commander of men but not a brilliant one; he was a first rate military organizer once the innovative conceptual work was past, a good builder and administrator of the military *apparatus* after the grand scheme had been devised; as a strategist he was at best a gifted amateur.

Giap, of course, is a legend, with a larger-than-life image which he has carefully cultivated from the first moment at Cao Bang and to which the Party and State in Hanoi, as well as the world's press, have enthusiastically contributed. His metaphoric appellation is *Nui Lua*, roughly "volcano beneath the snow," meaning a cold exterior but boiling within, an apt description of his personality according to those who know him. Associates also have described him as forceful, arrogant, impatient and dogmatic. At least in earlier years, he was ruthlessly ambitious and extraordinarily energetic, with a touch of vanity suggesting to interviewers that he should be considered an Asian Napoleon. He is said to be fiercely loyal to those of his political faction who grant him unreserved loyalty. He once told an associate that he took a "Darwinian view" of politics, and is said always to have been indifferent to arguments or reasoning based mainly on dogma. He always has been surrounded by political enemies and the victim of decades of sly whispering campaigns so common in Vietnam. (A typical whisper: General Dung, not Giap, planned the final successful assault at the battle of Dien Bien Phu because Giap had been struck down by diarrhea.)

Vo Nguyen Giap was born, by his account, in 1912 in the village of An Xa, Quang Binh province, although other reports say he was born in Thanh Hoa province in 1909. His official biography states he was born into a peasant family, but former associates say his family was impoverished mandarin of lower rank. His father worked the land, rented out land to neighbors, and was not poor. More important as a social indicator in Vietnam, his father was literate and familiar with the Confucian classics. Giap, in manner and in his writings, demonstrates a strong Confucian background. At 14, Giap became a messenger

for the Haiphong Electric Power Company and shortly thereafter joined the *Tan Viet Cach Mang Dang*, a romantically-styled revolutionary youth group. Two years later he entered *Quoc Hoc*, a French-run lycee in Hue, from which two years later, according to his account, he was expelled for continued *Tan Viet* movement activities. In 1933, at the age of twenty-one, Giap enrolled in Hanoi University. He studied for three years and was awarded a degree falling between a bachelor and master of arts (doctorates were not awarded in Vietnam, only in France). Had he completed a fourth year he automatically would have been named a district governor upon graduation, but he failed his fourth year entrance examination.

While at Hanoi University, Giap met one Dang Xuan Khu, later known as Truong Chinh, destined to become Vietnamese communism's chief ideologue, who converted him to communism. During this same period Giap came to know another young Vietnamese who would be touched by destiny, Ngo Dinh Diem. Giap, then still something of a Fabian socialist, and Diem, who might be described as a right wing nationalist revolutionary, spent evenings together trying to proselytize each other.

While studying law at the University, Giap supported himself by teaching history at the Thanh Long High School, operated by Huynh Thuc Khang, another major figure in Vietnamese affairs. Former students say Giap loved to diagram on the blackboard the many military campaigns of Napoleon, and that he portrayed Napoleon in highly revolutionary terms.

In 1938 he published his first work, co-authored with Truong Chinh, titled *The Peasant Question*, which argued not very originally that a communist revolution could be peasant-based as well as proletarian-based.

In September 1939, with the French crackdown on communists, Giap fled to China where he met Ho Chi Minh for the first time; he was with Ho at the Chingsi (China) Conference in May 1941, when the Viet Minh was formed.

At the end of 1941 Giap found himself back in Vietnam, in the mountains, with orders to begin organizational and intelligence work among the Montagnards. Working with a local bandit named Chu Van Tan, Giap spent World War II running a network of agents throughout northern Vietnam. The information collected, mostly about the Japanese in Indochina, went to the Chinese Nationalists in exchange for military and financial assistance which, in turn, supported communist organization building. Giap had little military prowess at his command, however, and used what he did have to systematically liquidate rich landlords who opposed the communists.

On December 22, 1944, after about two years of recruiting, training and military experimenting, Giap fielded the first of his armed propaganda teams, the forerunner of PAVN. By mid-1945 he had some 10,000 men, if not soldiers, at his command.

During these early years, Giap led the Party effort at organization busting which, with the connivance of the French, emasculated competing non-communist nationalist organizations, killing perhaps some 10,000 individuals (although these figures come from surviving nationalists and may be exaggerated). One of the liquidation techniques used by Giap's men was to tie victims

together in batches, like cordwood, and toss them into the Red River, the victims thus drowning while floating out to sea—a method referred to as “crab fishing.” Giap’s purge also extended to the newly created Viet Minh government: of the 360 original National Assembly members elected in 1946, only 291 actually took their seats, of whom only 37 were official opposition and only 20 of these were left at the end of the first session. Giap arrested some 200 during the session, some of whom were shot. He also ordered the execution of the famed and highly popular South Vietnamese Viet Minh leader, Nguyen Binh. Giap sent Binh into an ambush and he died with a personal letter from Giap in his pocket. He also was carrying a diary which made it clear he knew of Giap’s duplicity, but Binh went to his death in much the same spirit as did the old Bolshevik, Rubashov, in *Darkness At Noon*. Giap later confessed to a friend, “I was forced to sacrifice Nguyen Binh.”

With the Viet Minh war Giap faced his most challenging task, converting peasants *cum* guerrillas into fully trained soldiers through a combination of military training and political indoctrination. He built an effective army. Colonial powers always controlled the colonial countryside with only token military forces; they controlled the peasants because the peasants permitted themselves to be controlled. Giap built an army that changed that in Indochina.

In military operations in both the Viet Minh and Vietnam Wars, Giap was cautious and so meticulous in planning that operations frequently were delayed because either they or the moment was premature. Giap’s caution and policies led his opponents to underestimate both his military strength and his tactical skill, although as someone has noted, in war everyone habitually underestimates everyone else. Historians, particularly French historians, tend to case Giap in larger than life terms; they write of his flashing brilliance as a strategic and tactical military genius. But there is little objective proof of this. Perhaps the French write him large as a salve for bruised French ego. Giap’s victories have been due less to brilliant or even incisive thinking than to energy, audacity and meticulous planning. And his defeats clearly are due to serious shortcomings as a military commander: a tendency to hold on too long, to refuse to break off a battle even when losses are mounting prohibitively; a tendency to allow victory to intoxicate and lead to the taking of excessive and even insane chances in trying to strike a bold second blow; a preoccupation, while fighting the “people’s war,” with real estate, attempting to sweep the enemy out of an area that may or may not be militarily important.

Giap always was at his best when he was moving men and supplies around a battlefield, far faster than his foes had any right to expect. He did this against the French in 1951, infiltrating an entire army through their lines in the Red River Delta, and again in advance of the Tet offensive in 1968 when he positioned thousands of men and tons of supplies for a simultaneous attack on thirty-five major South Vietnamese population centers. If Giap is a genius as a general at all, he is, as the late Bernard Fall put it, a logistics genius.

General Giap’s strategic thinking early in the Vietnam War, from 1959 until at least 1966, was to let the NLF and PLAF do it by the Viet Minh War book. Cadres and battle plans in the form of textbooks were sent down the Ho Chi

Minh Trail. Southern elements were instructed in the proper mobilization and motivation techniques, centered on the orthodox *dau tranh* strategy that had worked with the French and in which Giap had full faith. Certain adjustment might be necessary with respect to political *dau tranh* and some minor adaptation of armed *dau tranh* might be required, his writings at this time indicated, but essentially the necessary doctrine was in existence and was in place.

What changed Giap's thinking, and his assumption that the war against the Americans could be a continuation of the war against the French, was the battle of Ia Drang Valley, the first truly important battle of the war. Giap's troops, veterans of Dien Bien Phu, when thrown against green First Cavalry Division soldiers, experienced for the first time the full meaning of American-style conduct of war: the helicopter, the lightweight bullet, sophisticated communication, computerized military planning, an army that moved mostly vertically and hardly ever walked. Technology had revolutionized warfare, Giap acknowledged in *Big Victory, Great Task*, a book written to outline his strategic response to the U.S. intervention. The answer, he said, was to match the American advantage in mass and movement or, where not possible, to shunt it aside. He was still searching for the winning formula when suddenly he was handed victory. The South Vietnamese Army which had stood and fought under far worse conditions, in January 1975, under minor military pressure, began to collapse. Soon it could not fight coherently. Giap was handed a victory he neither expected at the time nor deserved. How much command responsibility Giap had in the last days of the war, in 1975, is debated—much direction had passed to General Dung—but is unimportant in terms of distributing laurels, since none was deserved by any PAVN general.

After the Vietnam War General Giap slowly began to fade from the scene, withdrawing gradually from day-to-day command of PAVN. General Dung began to take up the reins of authority. Giap was given a series of relatively important short term task force assignments. He supervised the initial assumption by PAVN of various production and other postwar economic duties. He reorganized and downgraded the PAVN political commissar system, as the battle between Reds and Experts tilted ever more clearly toward the latter. He defended PAVN's budget against the sniping attack of cadres in the economic sector.

When the "Pol Pot problem" developed truly serious dimensions in late 1977, Giap returned to the scene. He spent most of 1978 organizing an NLF-style response for Kampuchea, that is, creation of a Liberation Army, a Liberated Area, a Radio Liberation, and a standby Provisional Revolutionary Government. This was the tried method, but by its nature, slow. Apparently the Politburo judged it did not have time for protracted conflict, and so in 1978 opted in favor of a Soviet-style solution: tanks across the border, invasion and occupation of Kampuchea. Giap opposed it, although evidence of this is mostly inferential, holding that a quick military solution was not possible, that Pol Pot would embrace a *dau tranh* strategy against PAVN and the result would be a bogged down war. Giap proved to be painfully correct and, for the sin of being right when all others are wrong in a collective leadership decision-making pro-

cess, was eased out of Politburo-level politics. Apparently all factions ganged up on him, but his removal was designed to eliminate Giap as factional infighter without tarnishing Giap the legend. It appears he did not resist this power play as he might have done, with possible bloody consequences, which may be a tribute to his better judgment.

Today Giap still is on the Vietnam scene, but plays a lesser role. He has taken upon himself the task of lifting Vietnam by its technological bootstraps, has become the leading figure in the drive to raise the country's technical and scientific capability. This requires, among other things, soliciting continued Soviet assistance, something Giap is able to do well because of the regard for him in the USSR. He confers frequently with Soviet advisors in Hanoi and in the Soviet Union; in 1980 he went to Moscow three times in a nine-month period.

General Giap has been a prolific writer and he continues to publish although not at his earlier pace. His best book perhaps is *People's War, People's Army*, although *Big Victory, Great Task* is more innovative and original. His most interesting book is *Dien Bien Phu*, while his worst certainly is *Once Again We Will Win*, his initial assessment of what was required to defeat the Americans which is virtually devoid of correct factual and technical judgments. See Bibliography for list of his works.

Senior General Van Tien Dung

General Van Tien Dung is PAVN's long-standing "number two man" who for most of his military career has served in the shadow of his superior, and mentor, General Vo Nguyen Giap. By all evidence, however, this has not proved to be a burden. Those who have known him over the years say he is of easy temperament, modest ego, an unimaginative mind, and a bland personality, and has always deferred to General Giap. During much of his military career he was considered to be a "mobilizer" rather than a strategist and in fact until quite late most of his assignments were administrative, not operational. He embraced early, and apparently without reservation, all the military doctrine and principles set down by General Giap, the central one being that the proper division of warfare, that is *dau tranh* (struggle), is into its two components, military and political.

Although he has written extensively, and is second only to General Giap in prolificacy, General Dung's works show little original thought. Rather most are either interpretations/restatements of the Giap military doctrine, or are narrow technical discussions of specific military problems. During the Vietnam War he was considered to be a "hard-liner" in that he stood against political settlement of the war. He was also regarded as "pro-Moscow" although in reality probably this meant only that he was acceptable to the USSR because he showed no clear affinity for China. (He visited the USSR in August 1963, May 1969 and, according to one source, attended a senior military school in Moscow, for six months or so in mid-1976.)

A continuing interest, and apparently assignment, from the earliest days has been strategic intelligence and the high level supervision of intelligence col-

lection activities. The Party-State *apparatus* that was created was innovative but Dung probably does not deserve the label "super spy" which was pinned on him by journalists during the Vietnam War. Much of his work in this area probably has been counter-intelligence, the ceaseless battle against counter-revolutionaries.

Van Tien Dung was born in 1917 in Co Nhue Village of Tu Liem district (Ha Dong Province), one of seven children in a middle-peasant family and thus has a less bourgeois background than most of his contemporaries in the Politburo and PAVN High Command.

At 16, with about six years schooling, he went to work and in 1938 was employed in the Cu Chung Textile Mill, Hanoi. He quickly became active in a front organization called the Worker's League, which was composed of twenty-six trade unions organized by trade, and in the same year, joined the Indo-chinese Communist Party. Two years later he was made a member of the Ha Dong Provincial Party Central Committee and assigned to front work, chiefly in the Ha Dong and Hanoi regions for the next four years. During this time he worked with and apparently impressed two early Party figures, Nguyen Luong Bang and Hoang Quoc Viet. In July 1939 he was arrested, jailed briefly and released, and then arrested again in September and sent to Son La prison, together with Trong Chinh. In 1941, while being transported to another prison, he escaped and for the next two years lived as a Buddhist monk at the Bot Xuyen Pagoda in My Duc district of his native Ha Dong province. In 1944 he returned to active Party work in covert propaganda activities including writing for the Party underground newspaper, *Lao Dong*. He was arrested again, jailed and again escaped and, since he was under automatic death sentence, fled to China, then joined Vo Nguyen Giap at the border training camp near Cao Bang, becoming an early Giap military cadre and within a year, "military commander" of an eight province sector in the northern region.

During the Viet Minh War Dung moved steadily into ever more important assignments: "Politburo representative" in the newly formed DRV Ministry of Defense (1945); deputy secretary of the original Central Party Military Committee (1946); commanding officer of the 320th Division (1950-51) (one of five such commanders); military commander and political commissar of the Third Military Region (1952); PAVN Chief of Staff (and PAVN Political Commissar) (1953); Delegate to the Regional (Trung-Gia) Armistice Negotiations (1954); then Representative to the International Control Commission (ICC) (1955-56). This latter assignment took him to Saigon where allegedly he arranged for the storing of arms caches for use later in the decade.

In the period between wars he continued as PAVN Chief of Staff. He held other State posts: National Defense Council (1960), National Assembly delegate (Ha Bac province) in the 5th and later legislatures and Party positions. He became a Central Committee alternate member in 1951 and a full member in 1960 (and in subsequent Congresses). He was made an alternate member of the Politburo in 1960 and a full member in 1972. Much of his day to day work during the early 1960s dealt with PAVN troop morale and loyalty, in which he supervised the various indoctrinational programs and institutions. How much

ideological substance there was in this is questionable, since he left behind little evidence of his work. His published materials during this time, for instance, are almost entirely exhortatory.

During the early years of the Vietnam War he and General Giap divided the highest level military duties. Giap concentrated on the war in the South, while Dung handled Northern air defenses; logistic operations (chiefly Ho Chi Minh Trail and sea infiltration); and the war in Laos. General Dung assumed a field command in 1971 and largely directed the 1972 Easter Campaign that was able to seize and hold much of Quang Tri province in northern South Vietnam. And he is generally credited with being the architect of the final battle of the war, what is called the Ho Chi Minh Campaign.

Throughout he has climbed the hierarchy ladder steadily: major general (then called brigadier general) in 1947; lieutenant general in 1954; colonel general in 1959; and senior general in 1974.

As General Giap faded into semi-retirement after the war, General Dung gradually assumed full control of PAVN. Under his overall supervision PAVN invaded Kampuchea in December 1978 and then defended Vietnam against the retaliatory invasion by China in February 1979. Reportedly General Dung has not assumed the full role once played by General Giap. Rather he and Le Duc Tho jointly guide such operations as the occupation of Kampuchea, dividing the highest level political and military responsibilities between them. Supposedly also he and Col. Gen. Le Trong Tan masterminded the planning of the Kampuchean invasion, although this assertion is questioned by some observers. General Dung became Minister of Defense in February 1980, a promotion which cynical Vietnamese emigres put down as a "reward" for the fact that PAVN's performance in Kampuchea as well as against China was inferior to what it had been during the Vietnam War.

In the never-ending factional infighting at the Politburo level, General Dung gradually moved from member of the General Giap entourage to leader of the faction, whose constituency is found chiefly in the PAVN officer corps, and includes the other three military members of the Politburo, Sen. Gen. Chu Huy Man and Col. Gen. Le Duc Anh and to lesser extent Lt. Gen. Dong Sy Nguyen, who in recent years has moved out of the military world and into the economic sector. Within PAVN itself the leading and closest members of the Dung faction are his Lt. Gen. Le Ngoc Hien and Lt. Gen. Phung The Tai, his operational commanders in the Kampuchea invasion (the former as ground commander and the latter as commander of air operations). In Politburo infighting the Dung faction first and foremost represents PAVN interests, particularly in the allocation of scarce resources such as manpower. It is believed that it frequently allies itself with the Le Duan faction in issues where PAVN interests permit collaboration.

General Dung has been married twice, has at least two children: a son and a daughter married to a PAVN Air Force fighter pilot. His second wife, Nguyen Thi Ky (also known as Thanh Tue), is an important Party official, agit-prop cadre during early years and now a lecturer at Hanoi University.

His major work is his memoir account of the last battle of the Vietnam

War, *Great Spring Victory*—a document remarkable for its candor and personalized treatment, the likes of which have not been seen before or since. For a full list of General Dung's writings see Bibliography.

Senior General Chu Huy Man

Chu Huy Man is a workhorse general whose assignments throughout most of his career have been drudge work, much of it in the back country. He is said to be modest and unflamboyant, devoted to his work but uncommunicative and until very recently a general who totally shunned the limelight. On the battlefield he is considered to be a good tactician, particularly in relatively small (single division) military operations.

It is believed, but not certain, that he is an ethnic Montagnard or part-Montagnard. The early PAVN ranks were filled with Montagnards, perhaps as many as 50 percent in the first days, and many of these had Montagnard company commanders. Because of innate Vietnamese prejudice and for other reasons few continued up the command ladder. Man, if he is an ethnic minority member, is the only one to transcend that impediment and make it all the way to the top. Political shifts within the Politburo in the 1980s suggest he may have an even more important place in the future scheme of things, particularly within PAVN.

Reports on Man's early life and background are conflicting, possibly deliberately so. He is the only senior general for whom no official biography has been issued. Presumably this will be done at his death. Biographical data on him produced during the Vietnam War listed him as having been born in Nghe An province in Central Vietnam in 1920; postwar defectors have maintained that he was born near the China border in 1914 of mixed Vietnamese-Montagnard parents.

It is probable, but not known for certain, that Man was with Giap at Cao Bang when the first armed propaganda teams were organized. The first mention of him, in the memoirs of other military figures is as political officer of the PAVN 316th division, under the command of Lt. Gen. Le Quang Ba in northern Vietnam in 1953. This was the so-called Highlander Division, with large numbers of Montagnards in its ranks. It is probable that Man was brought in to act as political indoctrinator and liaison with the ethnic minority troops in the division. The 316th Division was at Dien Bien Phu and presumably so was Man. In 1960 he was made commander and political commissar for the entire Tay Bac Military Region, a large but relatively unimportant sector in the mountain provinces opposite China largely populated by Montagnards. That same year he was elected a National Assembly delegate (Second Legislature) from Tay Bac Region; and in 1960 he became a member of the Party Central Committee. In 1962 he was made deputy chief of the PAVN General Political Directorate, under General Song Hao, and put in charge of Montagnard affairs within PAVN.

Man came South in 1965 as Deputy Commander and Political Commissar of the Fifth Military Region which included the northernmost portion of South

Vietnam, much of it in the Highlands. His work here was more Party than military, dealing chiefly with Montagnards of the region. Two years later he was named as commander of the B-3 front in the lower highlands and held this post for about two years before it grew in size and importance and General Tran Van Tra was installed over him and he became Tra's deputy.

In the last years of the war Man was considered to be a chief exponent of high-technology, big unit war in the South, which advocated extensive use of long range artillery, armor and blitzkrieg type assaults, although he was never able to demonstrate much skill here until the final chaotic battle of the war. General Dung in his memoirs credits Man with leading the successful PAVN sweep from Banmethuot in the mountains to the coast and then south into Saigon. His promotions indicate acknowledgement of his contribution: lieutenant general in 1975, colonel general in 1976, and senior general in 1980. (Earlier promotions: brigadier general 1954; major general 1960.)

Man's position within the Politburo factional infighting had been the subject of considerable debate among Hanoi watchers. Some observers with contacts in Moscow suggest he is a leader of a faction in his own right, drawing his constituency from elements of the now fragmented Giap faction, that is from within PAVN. He was never considered to be a member of the Giap faction however, and in fact some observers long considered him as something of a Politburo counterfoil to Giap. If he does not have his own faction, Man can be thought of as a member of the Le Duc Tho faction. He also appears to have good working relations, based on mutual interest, with the Le Duan faction. This has manifested itself in collaborative efforts on certain doctrinal and political matters such as with the administrative reorganization of the SRV governmental structure in 1980 and in the postwar Le Duan-Truong Chinh dispute over degree of intimacy with the USSR. Man has been interviewed by Soviet journalists several times, suggesting that Moscow does not regard him unfavorably.

Man's chief postwar assignment is as chief of PAVN Political General Directorate (replacing his former superior, General Song Hao) since this is the third most important post in PAVN and the first in terms of political sensitivity. It is rumored in diplomatic circles in Hanoi that Man also holds a special Party commission as monitor of PAVN military and security forces stationed in Hanoi, a sort of watchdog for possible *coup d'etats*. He has also had special assignments such as supervising the overhaul of the PAVN internal control mechanism and developments of its new Committee Inspection system. And he has a great deal of influence in the promotion and assignment of senior PAVN officers. There is no clear connection between Man and the war in Kampuchea or the China war. His most important recent assignment has been supervising the development of PAVN chemical warfare capability. He also continues to be a chief figure in the various PAVN emulation campaigns.

Man traveled very little during most of his career but since the end of the war has gone abroad a number of times: to Moscow (August 1979); Bulgaria (April 1981); Mongolia (August 1981) and Laos (December 1982). He also faithfully makes annual Tet trips to the Highlands, visiting Montagnards.

Man has written very little, none of it is what could be called significant. See *Bibliography* for list of his writings and speeches.

Senior General Nguyen Chi Thanh

Nguyen Chi Thanh is the most legendary of the senior PAVN generals, although none correctly can be painted as larger than life. He was handsome, had a flair for the dramatic, and possessed a relatively sophisticated if somewhat vain personality whose legend was assured by the manner of his death: under the falling bombs of a B-52 raid at the height of the war. If not brilliant he was truly clever, the archetypical Vietnamese communist general for whom politics and war were a seamless web. His rise within the PAVN system was far more understandable than the rise of most of his contemporaries.

Thanh was born on New Years Day 1914 into a poor peasant family in Nghiem Pho Village (Quang Dien district, Thua Thien province) which made him a Centerite and thus universally regarded by Northerners and Southerners alike as "complicated and vague speaking." He was orphaned at three and raised by relatives who were middle-farmers (i.e. they owned the land they worked). Apparently he was educated at a French-run lycee since he spoke French well although exactly how much education he had is not clear. For instance, it is not known whether he had any formal training for the occupation he initially chose, that of school teacher, which began in 1938. Nor is there any evidence of early revolutionary stirrings. He joined the Communist Party at the age of twenty-four, relatively later than most other early Party figures, but more importantly he joined in 1937, when radicalism among the young in the French colony was increasingly fashionable and the movement less dangerous (it was the time of the Popular Front). He was made Thua Thien Party Central Committee Secretary in late 1938, which called him to the attention of French authorities and began his prison career. He was arrested in late 1938, released a few months later, arrested again in 1939 and jailed at the Hue, Lao Bao and then the Ban-methuot prisons, escaping from the latter in 1941. He returned to the Hue area, resumed his teaching, then his Party work and was again arrested in late 1943, remaining in prison until released by the Japanese after their "coup" of March 1945.

With the formation of the DRV in 1945, Thanh was given a series of Party and State civilian posts: secretary again of the important Thua Thien Central Committee; membership in the Party's Central Committee; secretary of the Party's 4th Interzone Central Committee. He also began working with the young and played a major role in the creation of the Party's youth *apparat* that later became known as the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union. About this time, in the early 1950s, he moved easily into PAVN. He began at the top, as chief of what later became the PAVN General Political Directorate, which made him the Political Commissar for all of PAVN. He also (1950) became a member of the Party Central Military Committee. Apparently his first military rank was colonel general or three stars, for there is no earlier public reference to him holding a lower rank (he became full or senior general in 1959). His work within

the military was entirely of a political orientation, for which he had a natural affinity. It was not until years later, and then as a four star general, that he first commanded troops.

General Thanh's contribution to the Viet Minh war, and it was an important one, was to devise, develop and implement the program called *binh van* (action among the military), meaning non-military activities directed against French troops, particularly the black French Legionnaires, to induce desertion or at least to lower morale. Under his guidance the *binh van* program later extended to civilians (*chinh van*) as the B and C Program which became fully institutionalized with its own cadre corps, training institutes and text books. Thanh pioneered motivational techniques that would prove useful throughout the Vietnam War later. As Political Commissar his duties also meant insuring doctrinal purity by supervising the standard indoctrinational programs within PAVN. "My domain," he was quoted by a defector as saying, "has always been the human spirit."

After the Viet Minh War, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Thanh's career appeared to drift. He had assignments to the Vietnam Confederation of Trade Unions and the Fatherland Front. He traveled extensively, more than anyone else in PAVN: to Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria in 1958, to Moscow with Ho Chi Minh in 1960, to North Korea in 1961. In 1961 he was relieved of his Political Commissar post and moved into the Party Central Committee Rural Affairs Department, ostensibly to speed the agricultural collectivization program. This assignment was interpreted by some observers at the time as a demotion (not true); or as a gesture to the Chinese because of Thanh's supposed anti-Chinese attitude (also not true); or, more likely, to free him of routine duties so he could prepare for his assignment in the South.

A puzzling aspect of Thanh's career is the fact that his advent into positions of real power came in two bursts—the eight year climb from outsider to top level Party power in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and in the 1950s when, in a few years, he vaulted to the top of the PAVN hierarchy. The most adequate explanation for this, offered by Vietnamese observers, is that it was a matter of skillful politicking on Thanh's part.

In the Politburo level of political infighting, which he entered in 1951, Thanh was a member of the Truong Chinh faction which also included Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh and Hoang Van Hoan who later defected to China. It was widely reported, in the period following the Viet Minh War, that Thanh was being groomed as General Giap's successor. It was also suggested that Thanh was something of a challenger for Giap, suggestions that in some instances were traced to Ho Chi Minh himself. Probably the idea of rivalry between the two served Ho's interests although just how serious was the competition is debatable.

The Politburo in these years was sharply divided over several doctrinal questions, including how best to succeed in the South—success being defined as unification under Hanoi's banner—whether by some negotiational/diplomatic route or through the *dau tranh* strategy (and if through the latter, whether through emphasis on political *dau tranh* or armed *dau tranh*). While neither the

Truong Chin nor the Giap faction had any faith in negotiations or diplomacy, they split over interpretation of *dau tranh* strategy, Trinh (and Thanh) holding for political *dau tranh* and Giap for armed *dau tranh*. Transcending this strategic debate were broader foreign relations issues, particularly the Sino-Soviet dispute, which spilled over into the question of unification. Thus there were two separate doctrinal issues in dispute at the time. One was more or less technical: the proper strategy to use in the South to achieve unification. This was seen by outsiders as being equated to being more or less in harmony with the Mao model of People's war. The other was whether the enunciated Hanoi policy on unification should be conciliatory or hard line. Thus, because Thanh advocated greater use of armed *dau tranh* in the South, which was away from the Mao model, he was regarded by some experts, such as P. J. Honey, as being something of a Chinese anathema. But because he was also seen as highly militant on the matter of unification, he was regarded by other experts, such as Bernard Fall, as being if not pro-Chinese at least devoted to Peking's war line policy. Realizing their differences over interpretation of *dau tranh* strategy, both Giap and Thanh acknowledged that the balance between two kinds of *dau tranh* was a dynamic and constantly shifting—hence both shared a common strategic perception. By the mid-1960s, when there came the shift to armed *dau tranh*, Giap and Thanh basically agreed on the needs of the war.

Thanh took command of the communist military forces in the South in early 1965 and held it for about eighteen months until his death. His assignment was tacitly acknowledged even at the time—official statements said “in 1965 he took the post of leading the army,” they simply did not say where he was leading it. The eighteen months were crucial ones which saw the arrival of American ground troops into the war, but also were months of *ad hoc* reaction by PAVN, and strategic improvisation by General Thanh as the effort went forward to assess the new enemy's strategy and to plan a counter-strategy. This was not accomplished really until after Thanh's death. It was not until the Battle of Ia Drang valley that the full outline of PAVN's strategy appeared. How much credit Thanh gets for the eventual strategy devised can and is debated. Probably he should properly get less credit than Giap.

Reliable testimony from PAVN defectors indicates that General Thanh was killed at the age of 53 in late June, 1967 during a B-52 raid on his headquarters in Tay Ninh province. His official biography says he died at 9 A.M. July 6, 1967 at the 108th Military Hospital in Hanoi of a heart attack. The fact that the precise time and place is given, which is unusual in Hanoi obituaries, lends credence to the contention that he died elsewhere. China's condolence messages (including one from Mao and one from Liu-Shao Chi) were long and expressive, while the one from Moscow was one sentence signed by the CPSU Central Committee—if such messages are any indication of State or Party position. General Thanh is buried in Hanoi Soldier's Club cemetery, in Hanoi.

Most of Thanh's published writings were produced in the 1962–66 period. They are all short, none longer than monograph length, and rather intellectual in tone. Often he used a pen name, Truong Son, and in the South employed a code name, Anh Sau. Other aliases employed were Su Ri and Nam Hung and

(in the 1940s in the North) Nguyen Van Vinh, Hai Hau and Vo Van Hau. See Bibliography for list of his known works.

Senior General Hoang Van Thai

Hoang Van Thai is an old guard general, one of the original members of the Party whose participation in militant struggle dates back to 1930. He attached himself early and closely to General Giap and his climb up the hierarchy through the years is a reflection of that association. Thai is regarded as a competent but not inspired strategist, a good tactician and has been well liked by the men under his command.

Thai was born in 1906 in Thai Binh city, south of Hanoi, of middle class parents. He was educated at the Hanoi University, where he studied to be a teacher. He began his career teaching at a Hanoi high school, supposedly the same one that employed Vo Nguyen Giap. In any event he and Giap met early and their lives soon became entwined. They were both involved in attempting to organize anarchy during the turbulent early 1930s which saw the Nghe An uprisings and the Party's early experimentation with soviets or communes. When these were suppressed by the French, Thai and Giap fled to China where they spent much of the decade together. Thai studied at the famed Whampo Military Academy run by the Chinese Nationalists. Some reports say he traveled as an observer with Nationalist troops.

Thai was one of Giap's original military cadres in the formation of the first armed propaganda teams and also was deeply involved in the formation of the first formal Viet Minh military units in 1945, becoming deputy chief of staff of the Viet Minh National Salvation Army with the rank of brigadier general. Early in the war he commanded military operations in the Red River delta region around Hanoi. Later in the war much of his time was devoted to liaison work with the Chinese, securing weapons and military supplies. His writings imply that he served at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. In the period between wars he held various State and Party posts: a member of the State Science Commission; a National Assembly delegate from Nghe An (Third Legislature); chairman of the Physical Culture and Sports Commission; member of the Party Central Committee (1961); vice-minister of National Defense; and member of the National Defense Council (1964). He was promoted to major general in 1960 and lieutenant general in 1961. His military assignments during this time chiefly involved recruiting and training.

During the Vietnam War Thai became (1965) commander of Military Region V, which comprised the northern third of South Vietnam. In 1968 he became Chairman of the COSVN Military Committee, the Party's controlling *apparat* in the South, which effectively put him in command of the People's Liberation Armed Force, the NLF military instrument. He ostensibly had a liaison relationship with the PAVN command in the South but in actuality was subordinate to it, as was the PLAF.

His service in the South apparently ended in 1973 when he returned to Hanoi and was promoted to senior colonel general. He became a vice minister

of National Defense, a member of the CMPC and the director of the PVN General Technical Directorate.

Thai was a member of the Giap faction. He had long, close associations with the Chinese, and was a founding member of the Vietnamese-Chinese Friendship Association in 1950, but this does not appear to have hurt his career in recent years, as has been the case with other Vietnamese officials with Chinese connections. If there is any identifiable characteristic of his position within high level factional politics, it is as espouser of professionalism in military training, education and behavior. Despite his Chinese training and his early pro forma writings on military spirit, Thai always has been on the side of the expert in the red vs. expert debate. Since in post war years the preponderant influence within PAVN has also been in this direction, this is now a less contentious matter. Over the years Thai may have been something of a Giap stalking horse in this respect.

Thai's post war assignments chiefly have been in the training of PAVN officers including supervision of the complete overhaul of the military education system. His activity in the 1980s suggests he is in semi-retirement. He attends PAVN military science conferences and meetings on military education, and presides over ceremonial activities such as entertaining foreign military guests and sponsoring national sports events.

Thai has written under the name of Ngo Quoc Binh; he also employed the alias Hoang Van Thanh in command of the Fifth Military Region in the South during the war. Other aliases: Khang and An (in the early 1940s) and Muoi Khang.

His writings are fairly extensive but all short. His most important works perhaps are *Aspects of Guerrilla War in Vietnam* (1965) and "Experiences in Military Science" in *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan* December 1980. See Bibliography for full listings.

THE COLONEL GENERALS

Col. Gen. Chu Van Tan

Chu Van Tan is a true PAVN father figure for he was not only present at its creation but even ahead of Giap, having initiated revolutionary warfare in Vietnam. Tan is a Montagnard of the Nung tribe. He was skilled as a guerrilla fighter and useful to the Party as a conduit to the Montagnard society. It was that heritage, as son of the mountain and free in the forest, that led him into the struggle and provided the opportunity to do battle with the French *colon* weakened and preoccupied by World War II. It also was, perhaps inevitably, that same ethnic background that eventually spelled his fall into political oblivion if not disgrace.

Tan was born in 1909 (or 1908) in the Highland village of Phu Tong in Thai Nguyen province, the son of a Montagnard leader who himself had fought much earlier as a guerrilla with a band organized in the late 19th century by

a Vietnamese named De Tham. Tan began anti-French activity in his home province in the Highlands, around Vu Nhai, in the early 1930s. He joined the Party in 1934 and continued his work under Party guidance. He was at the February 1941 conference at which the Viet Minh league was formed and was with Giap at Pac Bo when the first armed propaganda teams were created. When the national front military force, called the Army for National Salvation, was created in September he was made its commander. In keeping with the Party's united front strategy, when the DRV was formed in August 1945, Tan was made its first Minister of Defense, a post he held for about six months. He was elected a member of the Party Central Committee in 1946, reelected in 1951 but not to the Fourth Congress in 1976.

After the Viet Minh War, Tan's activities shifted to the Fatherland Front and to the National Assembly where he served as a vice chairman of the Standing Committee assigned to Montagnard matters. He was made colonel general in 1959. In 1960 he became a member of the National Defense Council as well as of the Central Military Party Committee. As far as can be determined he played no significant role in these institutions. Possibly he did not even have a working military assignment during the entire Vietnam War. His duties in the 1960s and early 1970s became increasingly ceremonial. He did travel a great deal during this time: to Indonesia (1964), China (1965, 1971); North Korea and Mongolia (1965); Hungary (1974) and Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania (1971) and the USSR (1965, 1967, 1971, 1977); the 1977 USSR trip was his last journey abroad as far as is known.

Tan's last known public appearance was in July 1978, when he attended a routine ceremony honoring PAVN veterans. In July 1979, following the defection of Politburo member Hoang Van Hoan to China, there was a major crackdown by Hanoi security forces against individuals considered to be pro-Chinese or those with backgrounds that might make them sympathetic to China. Since many Montagnard tribes sprawl athwart the Vietnam-China border, with extended families living in both countries, such tribes automatically came under suspicion. This included both Nung and Tho tribes which apparently meant that Tan was no longer considered trustworthy. The first reports, in July 1979, said he had been arrested and was to be charged; later these were amended to his being placed under house arrest. These reports are considered reliable but have never been verified. What is certain is that Tan suddenly dropped completely out of Hanoi press reference.

Tan wrote quite widely on small scale guerrilla warfare, Party-Montagnard relations and Montagnard culture and customs. His most interesting work perhaps is his memoirs, *Reminiscences on the Army for National Salvation* which deals with his early years ending with the start of the Viet Minh War. See Bibliography for list of his works.

Col. Gen. Song Hao

Song Hao is PAVN's major if not preeminent ideologue, perhaps its most intellectual and certainly its most uncompromising. Throughout his career he has always been in the forefront of the various doctrinal battles within PAVN

and between the military and outside challengers to PAVN's interest, and always as a hardliner. He lived by the sword of dogma and by all evidence died by the sword of dogma, politically, when in 1980 he was on the losing side of a Politburo level factional fight that eased him out of power and into a sinecure position.

Song Hao is believed to have been born in or near Haiphong about 1920, of middle or possibly upper class parents, and educated at a French lycee—although little is known for sure about his early life and nothing about him has been published in the Hanoi press. Such an official blackout of so prominent a figure would tend to substantiate the contention that he does not have a proletarian background and that he did not acquire his revolutionary consciousness until late, after the Viet Minh war. Other reports, little more than rumors actually, hold that the dearth of information about his early life is due to the assignments held, in the security field rooting out counter-revolutionaries and other enemies of the Party.

Hao's first announced military assignment was as a major general in 1957 when he was named a deputy in the PAVN General Political Directorate, which certainly could not have been a PAVN entrance assignment. He was promoted to major general in 1959, to lieutenant general in 1961 and colonel general in 1974 (or perhaps 1973). He also has been a National Assembly delegate since 1971.

Hao's success within the Party system over the years appears initially to have been the result of his innate talent and consequently his utility to the Party, rather than through connections within the PAVN "old boy" network. His subsequent rise in influence is a tribute to his mastery of the game of *bung di* (faction bashing), the mode of political competition in Vietnam. In this Hao probably has been able to make good use of the power base he established within the all important PAVN General Political Directorate. There is no doubt that in the years immediately following the Viet Minh War, when the Party was consolidating its control of the military and Hao was named PAVN chief Political Commissar, he was chiefly concerned with "negative phenomena" such as challenge to Party authority within PAVN, and less with positive troop indoctrination which became the Political Commissar's stock in trade later. The early years required dedication, competence and ruthlessness in making the military a loyal instrument of the Party and this is what Hao supplied.

In the Vietnam War, Hao served as DRV Vice Minister with overall responsibility for recruiting and training PAVN troops, and in an allied job as secretary of the Central Military Party Committee with the task of defining and communicating the Party's "military line" throughout PAVN and ensuring that military performance and personal behavior adhered to it. In short, his task was to produce and dispatch to the South a military force of unquestioning obedience to the Party. This he did and thus Song Hao can take as much credit as any PAVN strategist for the final victory.

As a member of the Giap faction, Hao's *bête noire* through the years appeared to be the Chinh faction, because of basic disputes over the best means to achieve unification of Vietnam. His downfall apparently resulted from the

breakup of the Giap faction and the subsequent bid to power by the Le Duan faction. Fairly reliable reports say that in early 1980 the Le Duan faction moved to overhaul the PAVN political commissar system and replace key personnel from the Giap faction with those from the Le Duan faction and Hao was the defender against this move, although ostensibly the issue was fought out as the red vs expert with Hao defending the former and Le Duan the latter. In any event Hao was defeated at the Politburo level and was eased into a diminished role as greeter of arriving Bulgarians at the Hanoi airport and similar ceremonial functions. In 1982 he had made something of a political comeback. He was named Minister of War Invalids and Social Welfare, a not unimportant post on the government side, since its constituency consists of a vast number of military veterans although they are not politically organized.

Hao's writings are voluminous but tend to be technical in nature, that is dealing with the technology of mobilizing and motivating PAVN's human strengths to serve the Party's interests. His most important works perhaps are *Party Leadership: the Source of Our Army's Victories* which deals with the ideological dimension of PAVN and *PAVN's Revolutionary Nature and Tradition*, a brief ideological history of PAVN through the Viet Minh and Vietnam Wars. See Bibliography for list of Hao's works.

Col. Gen. Vuong Thua Vu

General Vuong Thua Vu was the closest to being a, "general's general" as any senior PAVN commanders; one who left behind little record of Party activity. He was PAVN's first preeminently technical general, the most extreme of the "experts" in the red vs. expert debate. Most of his military assignments involved technical matters—procurement, technical military education, air defenses and, shortly before his death, chemical warfare.

Vu was born as Vuong Van Giao, the son of a science teacher, Vuong Van Ty in Hanoi (some sources say Son Tay province) in 1916 (or 1910). He was well educated, particularly in technical and scientific matters, by his father, at a French high school and later in China where he went in the mid-1930s. He spent the early years of World War II in China then returned to Vietnam where with Chinese assistance he was involved in training guerrillas in the Ha Dong region to fight the Japanese. He returned to Hanoi on the heels of the occupying Chinese Nationalists in 1945, apparently in their service, but then took the early political decision to join the Viet Minh. He had a series of "right bank" commands (interior Vietnam) until 1950 when he was given command of the 308th Division which saw service at Dien Bien Phu.

Between wars Vu's duties were chiefly in the rear services. He was director of the senior PAVN military academy and then Deputy Chief of Staff (training). Early in the Vietnam War he was commander of Military Region Three, then was assigned first to the Air Defense command and then the Air Missile command. When the air war ceased in 1973, he went to the PAVN chemical service which he enlarged and developed into the Chemical Command. He became a

major general in 1950, a lieutenant general in 1975 and a colonel general posthumously in 1980.

When Vu died there was no public funeral nor even a published death notice. First indication of his death for the outside world was the National Assembly announcement April 27, 1980, that he had been posthumously awarded the Ho Chi Minh Order, Second Class, "in recognition of his meritorious services and moral qualities." Thus he could have died at any time between 1975, his last known public appearance, and 1980; more probably however it was about 1980. In the months preceding the National Assembly announcement, however, there had been rumors in the diplomatic community in Hanoi that General Vu had been killed in a helicopter accident in Kampuchea; other rumors had more mysterious interpretations of his death. The announcement of the award of a medal was seen as an official effort to put the rumors to rest. As is inevitable in Vietnam, in instances where officials act ambiguously, the medal ceremony set off a new spate of rumors, that Vu had been executed for conspiring with pro-Chinese elements in a *coup d'etat* plot; this later rumor appears to have no basis in fact other than Vu's record of early service in the Chinese Army. It was because of this second round of rumors apparently that PAVN officially elevated Vu to the rank of colonel general.

Vu wrote extensively, mostly about technical and educational matters within PAVN. See Bibliography.

Col. Gen. Le Duc Anh

Colonel General Le Duc Anh is a recent arrival on the PAVN public scene and a newcomer to the ranks of senior PAVN officers. The first public reference to him came in September 1975, when he was listed as a lieutenant general and named a PAVN Deputy Chief of Staff. The report did say he took part in the last battle of the war, but gave no details. He was made a member of the Party Central Committee in 1976 and named to the Politburo in 1982, being promoted at the same time to colonel general.

Anh has a reputation of being a Party trouble shooter to be assigned temporarily to PAVN trouble spots to rectify matters and then move on to a new assignment. This may have been his earlier career, attached to the Central Party Military Committee rather than to the Ministry of Defense. Or it may be that he is new to the military.

His assignments since the end of the Vietnam War have included Deputy Chief of Staff (personnel); political commissar of the 7th MR; and (according to the Chinese) deputy commanding officer of the PAVN forces in Kampuchea. In 1981 he was involved in a major mobilization drive that sought to increase the number and quality of PAVN recruits. Since being appointed to the Politburo, according to Japanese sources, General Anh has had the responsibility of "national defense in industry" with the task of ensuring that PAVN receive the military hardware and supplies it requires. This would involve liaison work with the USSR as much as it would with the Vietnamese industrial sector.

Col. Gen. Le Trong Tan

Colonel General Le Trong Tan spent much of his career as a “southern general,” an impediment he has been able to transcend, although for years he was regarded as simply one more reliable PAVN lieutenant general. In the 1980s he broke loose from the pack and became a man moving quickly upwards. He gives every promise, if he can master the art of Byzantine intrigue in Hanoi’s corridors of power, of becoming a dominant figure in PAVN, if not its eventual commander-in-chief.

Tan was born in Haiphong (some reports say in Dong Hoi) of middle class parents and received at least a secondary education. He is believed to have worked as a young man in Central Vietnam, where he joined the Viet Minh when it was organized there, at the end of World War II moving to Hanoi. He showed promise as a military commander from the start and advanced up the ladder quickly: he commanded the PAVN 312th Division from 1949–53 and the 320th Division from 1953–55. After the Viet Minh War he went to China and the USSR for advanced military training, then returned home to take charge of the PAVN military training system.

In the early 1960s Tan came South (as General Ba Long) and he continued in recruiting and training assignments. In 1968 he became the PLAF chief of staff, then held a series of military commands in northern South Vietnam, finally becoming commander of the “eastern front” (MR 2 and MR 4) in the final campaign of the war. He was made major general in 1961, lieutenant general in 1974, and colonel general in 1980.

After the Vietnam War General Tan returned to Hanoi as PAVN Deputy Chief of Staff and then, in 1980, as Chief of the PAVN General Staff. Much of his work in the 1980s has involved liaison with the USSR. The Hanoi press frequently notes his welcoming Soviet military officials to Hanoi or his visiting them in Moscow. He has been given a high Soviet medal (1980) and received other honors in the USSR. Clearly he is PAVN’s chief “barbarian manager” for important military visitors.

There is little information on General Tan’s political activities in the upper reaches of the Party, if any. He is considered to be close to the Le Duc Tho faction. He is not associated closely with Party activities, although he is a member of the Party Central Committee and the Central Party Military Committee. Nor, perhaps fortunately for him, is he identified in any direct way with the war in Kampuchea.

General Tan’s writings are fairly extensive but almost all of them are brief and not of broad scope. See Bibliography.

Col. Gen. Le Hien Mai

General Le Hien Mai is an early PAVN military commander, although not one of the originals, who had an unspectacular but contributive career facilitated, it would appear, by the fact that he is a Montagnard (Nung Tribe). As

such he was useful to the cause in the early years and later was able to rise in rank not only because of his continuing utility to the Party but by virtue of the fact that he was considered trustworthy, since he was a Montagnard. However, he was never a truly important wielder of power in or out of PAVN. There are lieutenant generals who are more influential than he and his elevation to the rank of colonel general in 1982 has the earmark of an honorary exit promotion.

Le Hien Mai was born in Son Tay Province in 1915 under the name Khuat Duy Tren (some sources list it as Khuat Duy Phuong), the son of a Montagnard chief named Khuat Duy Trac. Reportedly he was educated by French missionaries. Judged by his writings he was better educated than were most Montagnards at the time. He has said that he operated his own guerrilla band against the Japanese and French during World War II, before linking up with PAVN in 1945.

His first PAVN command was the "capital guard" which protected the Party and DRV headquarters and officials in the hills above Hanoi after 1945. He was sent South in 1951 as commander of the Central Nam Bo zone, which was mostly a safe haven and rear area supply center rather than a scene of combat. He returned to Hanoi at the end of the Viet Minh War and was again named commander of the headquarters protection unit, now called the Hanoi Capitol Military Zone. Such an assignment—protection of the Politburo and PAVN High Command—would not be considered unusual because Montagnards, particularly Nungs, are regarded by Vietnamese political leaders as generally of stronger loyalty than are most Vietnamese, and thus less likely to be tempted into *coup d'etat* plots and similar conspiratorial bids for power. Thus both in South and North Vietnam, Nungs have been used as the guards of the guardians.

Mai was made a member of the Central Party Military Committee and elected to the Party Central Committee in 1960. He is believed to have gone South shortly thereafter to assist in the establishment of the PLAF recruiting and training system, then being ambitiously expanded. He returned to Hanoi in 1968 and was assigned to the General Political Directorate as a deputy director and put in charge of supervising the recruiting and training of the PAVN Militia, chiefly in the Highlands, which would mean he was again acting as a liaison with the Montagnard community. He appears to have gone into semi-retirement in 1973, when public references to him largely stopped, and into complete retirement in 1982.

General Mai's claim to fame, or notoriety, could almost be said to be the confusion he has caused over the years by frequently working under the alias Duong Quoc Chinh. Apparently he chose this name at an early age and used it frequently. Unfortunately, for researchers at least, there are one or possibly two other prominent figures on the Hanoi scene also named Duong Quoc Chinh, one who became Minister of the Interior and later Minister of War Invalids and Social Welfare, the other in the field of agriculture and water conservancy (some outside observers believe these two later Duong Quoc Chinh are the same person). However based on existing information it appears that the two are separate individuals. The greatest confusion here comes in sorting out pub-

lished writings. General Mai, under that name, wrote extensively on military matters. Minister Duong Quoc Chinh wrote almost entirely on interior or veterans' matters but scattered throughout the writings credited to him are military articles which logic would dictate were written by General Mai writing under the name Duong Quoc Chinh.

Col. Gen. Tran Van Tra

Tran Van Tra is PAVN's chief and most experienced political *dao tranh* technician whose military career was spent largely in that South Vietnam no-man's-land between war and politics. In terms of the outcome of the Vietnam War he was very good at his work, but since success as a master of clandestine warfare means, by definition, you are effective to the extent the world is ignorant of you, there is no objective means to evaluate Tra's contribution to final victory. His milieu was a world and a war enveloped by a permanent fog of uncertainty—one he skillfully engendered and perpetuated—in which the ground continuously shifts beneath the feet of all combatants, and no one is sure actually on whose side is compatriot or enemy. With the possible exception of General Giap, no PAVN general stands out today as a sharply etched figure. Most are shadowy with ill-defined outline, but none has quite as murky an image as General Tra. He was the conspirator's conspirator, until recently more phantom than general even to those on his own side. But, as perhaps might be expected, Tra could not survive in the new age of more orthodox warfare that Vietnam entered after 1975, and so it was that his coming in from the cold proved his ruin.

In his halcyon days, when he was in the South running the Vietnam War as an optical illusion for the communist side, the steady flow of allied intelligence reports, mostly from defectors, variously described his physical appearance (he had a moustache, he did not); frequently located him in several places at the same time (Zone D, Hanoi, Moscow for medical treatment); and periodically reported him dead, disabled or about to defect. He traveled under a host of aliases: Tu, Muoi Tri, Tu Chi, Tu Nuy, Tu Nu Nguyen and Tran Nam Trung. Reportedly he also lived and worked under the names of other PAVN generals who were still back in Hanoi. Often defectors who presumably knew him could not agree on photos of him. Apparently he delighted in this subterfuge, even to his own staff, and in some cases engaged in it almost as a practical joke.

This sort of behavior by Vietnamese leaders grew out of Vietnam's heritage of the politics of clandestinism that was the Vietnamese method of dealing first with the occupying Chinese and then with the occupying French. It is considered quite proper even to fool one's close associates, and was practiced by all 20th century Vietnamese nationalists to some extent. Ho Chi Minh, of course, was the absolute master of juggling reality for the onlooking world, and he went to his grave with no one exactly sure who he was or what he stood for.

Tra was born Jan. 15, 1918 in a Quang Ngai fishing village of a fishing family. He received about six years of elementary schooling and then went to

work for the Vietnam Railroad which ran through his province. There, he says, he became radicalized and in 1940 joined the Communist Party. He spent the next decade in central and southern Vietnam, including two years in Ba To prison in Quang Ngai. During World War II, and then during the early Viet Minh War years, he did Party organization work in the South, recruiting and training the first armed propaganda teams in the Central Vietnam region (Interzone Six, Seven and Eight) which had the task of mobilizing and motivating villagers to support the cause. Gradually he worked his way up the PAVN ladder in the South eventually becoming commander of Interzone Seven in the Viet Minh War which was something of a military backwater. It did, however, turn him into a general highly experienced in the uses and techniques of political *dau tranh*. Tra "regrouped" to the North after the Geneva Accords were signed and spent several years in PAVN military schools. He was made a division commander (PAVN 330th Division), promoted to major general in 1958, and elected to the Party Central Committee in 1960. In the early 1960s he held a series of training commands.

In 1963 Tra came South again where he put his earlier experience in political *dau tranh* and his newly acquired experience in recruiting and training to work. He became secretary of the Military Committee of the People's Liberation Army (later People's Liberation Armed Force or PLAF). While there was an ultimate single command for the PLAF and PAVN (the High Command in Hanoi) in the South the two were kept administratively separate, maintaining a clear division of labor. Gradually, as the war continued, PAVN assumed more and more of the burden of combat (by 1973 it was conducting 90 percent of the day-to-day combat) and the importance of the PLAF faded. Tra gradually shifted to more purely political work, first with the Provisional Revolutionary Government which presumably would assume the governing of the South after victory and then in January 1973, as chief communist figure at the Two Party Joint Military Commission structure established under the Paris Agreements to supervise the cease-fire. In a few months he returned to Hanoi, and then after the fall of South Vietnam, returned to Saigon as the Chairman of the Saigon-Gia Dinh Military Management Committee, which was in effect the PAVN temporary military government established in the South. His chief task here was insuring internal security.

Tra remained in the Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) region. Reports filtering out of Vietnam in 1983 said he had fallen into disgrace and was living in semi-retirement (some reports said house arrest) in a posh home in suburban Ho Chi Minh City. One explanation for this was that he had been a deputy military commander of Military Region Seven during the PAVN invasion of Kampuchea, had bungled his command and was relieved. But there was no previous indication he had been involved in the Kampuchea invasion, nor any logic to such an assignment. Another explanation was that his postwar memoir had incensed important Politburo figures because of the short shrift it gave to the contributions of the southern wing of the Party. The work does indeed give scant credit to the PLAF, but since Tra is a major figure in this faction, the so-called Trung Bo Mafia, it is probable that his constituency considers his motives

for the treatment afforded to be acceptable. Deliberately or inadvertently, General Tra has wandered back into the fog of unreality.

General Tra's writings are relatively modest. By far the most important and most interesting is his *Vietnam: History of the Bulwark B-2 Theater*, published in five volumes. His last known published work was a rather theoretical one on the relationship of the economy and the needs of the national defense in *Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, March 1980. See Bibliography.

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